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**A SKETCH OF RECENT  
SHAKESPEREAN INVESTIGATION**

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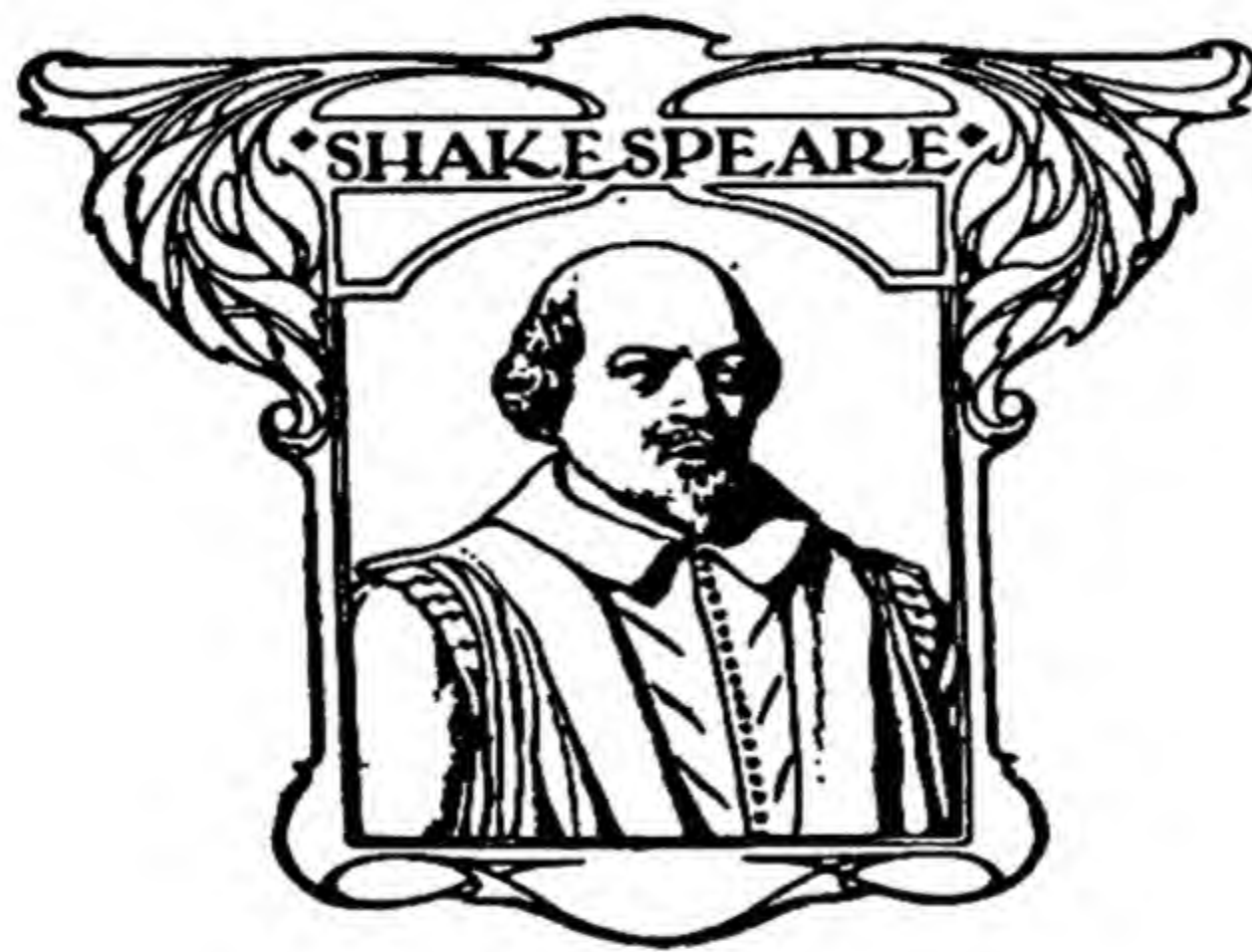
# A SKETCH OF RECENT SHAKESPEREAN INVESTIGATION

1893-1923

BY

C. H. HERFORD, M.A., LITT.D.

Honorary Professor of English Literature, University of Manchester



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## PREFACE

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The following pages were originally written for the recent edition of the *Henry Irving Shakespeare* originally issued in 1893, under the editorship of the late Frank Marshall, with the collaboration of the late Professor Edward Dowden and others. They attempt to supplement Dowden's account there given of the state of our knowledge of Shakespeare and his work as it was at that time, by a summary indication of what has been done, in the various regions of this vast domain, during the thirty years which have since intervened. It will be understood that this is in no sense a bibliography. What is aimed at is merely to offer a conspectus of prevailing tendencies, with a description and criticism of some salient examples.

Such a survey may possibly be of service both to the student and to the general reader. Not only has production during these years been of bewildering abundance, it has by no means been carried on mainly along the familiar traditional channels for which the old charts furnish a sufficient guide. In range and severity of Elizabethan scholarship this period, it can scarcely be doubted, shows a definite advance. But discovery—and invention—have easily kept pace with the amassing of facts, and the most acute and laborious research has often been devoted to fortifying new and even revolutionary positions. There may be little comparison, in brilliance of single achievements, between this period of thirty years and that which witnessed the lectures and essays



of Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt, the criticism of Goethe and Schlegel, the final labours of Malone and the early (and still blameless) labours of Collier. But in the number and variety of the minds at work, and especially in the extent and closeness of their scientific grip upon their subject-matter—not Shakespeare only, or literature only, but the whole Elizabethan domain, in all its aspects, of which he was, for us, the commanding figure—here the last thirty years surpass any previous generation. It will suffice to refer to the fresh light which has been thrown upon Shakespeare's elusive personal life; to the immense extension of our knowledge of the Elizabethan stage, with important consequences for our interpretation of his technique; to the more scientific criticism of his text rendered possible by the study of the history of the written play in its course from the author's desk, by way of prompter and actor, to the printer's bench; and, finally, to the brilliant re-interpretations of the Shakesperean drama and poetry essayed by several critics of high calibre—a Bradley or a Raleigh in this country, a Brandes or a Croce abroad. The present attempt to survey this rich and diversified territory must inevitably be in some degree personal. The inclusions and exclusions arrived at, the categories and divisions adopted, the preferences and condemnations expressed, necessarily bear the stamp of the writer's very partial knowledge and inevitably individual point of view. It is hoped that it may nevertheless serve the purpose of a first orientation.

C. H. H.

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# I. SHAKESPEARE'S ENVIRONMENT AND BIOGRAPHY

§ 1. Shakespeare will always remain, for students of letters, the most powerful of the magnets which allure to closer acquaintance with the Elizabethan age. Bernhard ten Brink, the brilliant historian of our Old and Middle English literature, forged his way with a more cheerful courage through the wilderness of the fifteenth century because Shakespeare beckoned from the end of the way. But Elizabethan England has not been investigated and described only or chiefly by students of letters. To the historian of politics, economics, antiquities, religion, law, it offered absorbing problems with which for the most part the humble playwright of the Globe Theatre had very little to do. The decisive moments in the history of the period from any of these points of view bore no relation to the opening or the close of the momentous twenty years in which he wrote for the London stage. Of the two classical Histories of England under Elizabeth and James, Froude's stopped short at the Armada, 1588, Gardiner's started with Elizabeth's death in 1603; thus leaving precisely the most crucial and problematic years of the poet without a historian. While a mass of special study had thus been devoted to the England in which Shakespeare lived, no consistent or sustained attempt had been made to treat it as his environment, *his* England, woven by countless filaments of allusion into the woof of his art.

Shakespeare's  
England

This want was in a certain degree met by the publication of the Elizabethan cyclopedia called *Shakespeare's England*, in 1916, the Tercentenary year.

The new publication does not on the whole claim to do more than present a convenient conspectus of these studies at the high level which had been reached in 1916. But many papers bring together from recondite sources facts never yet made generally accessible. Their value lies less in throwing any new light on the matter or text of Shakespeare's work, than in the delineations, conveyed in a profusion of scattered touches, of the ideas and



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habits, traditions and prejudices, knowledge and ignorance of the town population for which he wrote. The "courtier" who watched and applauded *The Tempest* or *Othello* at Whitehall is in most minds an abstraction compounded of floating memories of Sidney or Raleigh. Prof. George Unwin puts blood into this abstraction, and suggests the preoccupations through which the philosophy of Prospero had to make its way, when he tells us, in an extremely valuable article (*Commerce and Coinage*, u. s. I. 311 f.) how "the courts of Elizabeth and James were crowded by a medley of projectors and suitors, compared with the best of whom the most self-helpful of Mr. Smiles's heroes shines as a disinterested enthusiast". Why, again, is the business-world, the honest trader and worker, so completely insignificant in the Shakesperean drama? Prof. Unwin again gives part of the answer: "The triumph of honest enterprise was overshadowed by the feverish delusions of speculation and the selfish greed of monopoly. A lively mood of adventure pervaded all classes, but the sound elements were counteracted by the unsound." Further help in appreciating the composition of the London population may be gathered from R. H. Tawney's valuable picture of the results of enclosures (*Agrarian Problems of the Sixteenth Century*, 1912), and Prof. H. Routh's illuminating chapter on "London and the Development of Popular Literature" (*Camb. Hist. Eng. Lit.*, Vol. IV, ch. xvi), the best analysis yet given of the mingled social currents in that vortex, the average human stuff which took boat across the river after the midday ordinary, to crowd the floor and galleries of the Globe.

Shakespeare's  
"Country"

§ 2. Shakespeare's more immediate environment, too, has grown at many points clearer during the past thirty years. Sir Sidney Lee, the Chairman of the Stratford trustees, has, with Mrs. Charlotte Stopes, taken the lead in this field of research. What was known of Stratford, and Shakespeare's association with it, up to its date is collected in his monograph (*Stratford on Avon*, 1907). Lee has especially enlarged our knowledge of the families of wealth and position near Stratford with whom Shakespeare the "gentleman" and landed proprietor became intimate after 1602; particularly the intricately interrelated family of the Combes, one of whom, John Combe of Stratford, we know to have been an especial friend of Shakespeare and to have left him a legacy on his death in 1614. Mrs. Stopes's researches (*Shakespeare's Warwickshire Contemporaries*, 1907; *Shakespeare's Environment*, 1914) have ranged over a wider circle about the Stratford centre. Here are grouped together all the Warwickshire men who are known to



have even remotely entered into Shakespeare's *milieu*—the Lucy family, in three generations; Richard Field, the printer of his first book; Edward Arden, and John Hall his son-in-law; Michael Drayton, fellow poet and perhaps a boon companion of his later years. In the last named work she has shown the existence of several other "William Shakespeares" in the Warwickshire neighbourhood. The sporting and other interests of the Warwickshire and Gloucestershire countryside, with which Shakespeare shows himself everywhere so familiar, received some fresh and piquant illustration in D. H. Madden's *Diary of Master William Silence* (new edition, 1907). In Justice Shallow he is generally believed to have glanced at Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote. The glimpses we get of his household affairs and of some of his neighbours may not be true of Shallow's steward, Davy, but they disclose an intimate knowledge of the Cotswold region of Gloucestershire bordering upon Stratford to the west. Thus, when Davy begs his master to "countenance" William Visor of Woncot, an admitted knave, against "Clement Perkes of the Hill", on the pleasant ground that "an honest man, sir, is able to speak for himself, when a knave is not" (2 *Hen. IV*, v. 1. 42), we now know that both Vizor and Perkes were members of actual families so named then residing at Woncot (Woodmancote) and Stinchcombe Hill, hard by, still known to the countryside, as to Shallow's Davy, as "the Hill". It was a Cotswold custom, too, to sow "red wheat" in the early autumn, as Davy is bidden do in the same scene (*ib.* v. i. 16).

§3. Our knowledge, if any is possible, of Shakespeare's early life, and in particular of his "education" and "culture", can only be reached by deduction, from the data furnished by his works. That these data can be variously interpreted was already clear in the eighteenth century, when Farmer exposed Shakespeare's want of "learning" for the greater glory of the genius which achieved so much without it. The Shakespereans of the nineteenth century decidedly withdrew from Farmer's negative position; even when they did not, like Charles Knight (in his *Pictorial Shakespeare*), class Farmer among the assailants of Shakespeare, or, like most German interpreters up to 1850 at least, conceive the dramatist as a profound philosopher. The minute investigation of the literary and intellectual background of the plays, carried on throughout the century, left his knowledge of books, even of Latin books, beyond doubt, but falling short of erudition.

Culture

✓ In the criticism of the last thirty years two contradictory



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tendencies in this matter are perceptible. Classical scholarship of to-day is very much alive to the Shakesperean analogies, in conception and in phrase, to be found in ancient drama, and is less inclined than Farmer to suppose them fortuitous. The striking parallel of Orestes and Hamlet, in particular, has been closely studied. The ablest and most intrepid of recent attempts in this direction is the essay by J. Churton Collins (*Studies in Shakespeare*, 1904). Collins, a classically trained Shakesperean specialist, made many additions to the parallels previously recognized, and based on them the conclusion that Shakespeare, if not a classical scholar in Milton's or Jonson's sense, at least knew the Attic drama at first hand. Collins's skilful use of his wide and exact learning made his results impressive; but later criticism—fortified of course by Jonson's own well-known allusion, in a context of high and generous praise, to his "small Latin and less Greek"—has taken more account than Collins was disposed to do, of the considerable classical knowledge floating in the atmosphere of the largely university-bred literary world of Shakespeare's London, and to his own admittedly extraordinary gift of assimilation. But Collins's researches certainly made the extent of this floating treasure more evident.

Similar questions are raised by George Wyndham's discussion of Shakespeare's "Platonism" (*The Poems of Shakespeare*, 1898), and that of Mr. J. S. Harrison in *Platonism in English Poetry* (1903). The comparison between Shakespeare and Spenser is here informing. Plato's religion and metaphysic of Love and Beauty has furnished the very substance of *The Foure Hymnes*; it provides but a brilliant thread here and there in the splendid woof of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

A very serviceable compendium of the books which Shakespeare can be shown on internal evidence to have known, has been provided by Mr. H. R. D. Anders in his *Shakespeare's Books* (1904), the most complete and scholarly statement of the matter yet attempted. How intimately the young Shakespeare knew Ovid, and how steeped his early style is in reminiscences of the poet whose "sweet and witty soul", Meres declared, had passed into his own, is shown in an excellent study by Sir Sidney Lee (*Quarterly Review*, April, 1909). A copy of the *Metamorphoses*, in the original, signed with his name, is preserved in the Bodleian, and it is generally allowed to have been the one he used. On the other hand, the copy of Montaigne's *Essays*, in the British Museum, once supposed to be his, has forfeited that claim, the signature of his



## ENVIRONMENT AND BIOGRAPHY

name on the fly-leaf being now shown to be a forgery. His abundant use of the Essays, however, from 1603 onwards, is beyond question.

§ 4. No addition has been made to our knowledge of the single unquestionable event of Shakespeare's youth and early manhood at Stratford, his marriage. But a specious hypothesis has been advanced by Mr. J. W. Gray (*Shakespeare's Marriage*, 1907), which, if it could be entertained, would explain the absence of an entry of Shakespeare's marriage with Ann Hathaway, in the Stratford or any other known register. At Worcester, under date 28th November, 1582, a licence was issued, as we know, for this marriage. But on the day before, 27th November, a licence, entered in the same register, was issued to "William Shakespeare" to marry one Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton. Mr. Gray argues for a clerical error in the entry. We may more probably find an illustration of the known frequency of Shakespeare's name in the West Midlands, in the fact that two men bearing it took out a marriage licence on successive days.

Marriage

§ 5. The five or six years between Shakespeare's leaving Stratford (c. 1587) and the angry allusion to him by the dying Greene (1592) remain obscure. But much patient and ingenious research has been devoted to the attempt to elucidate them; in particular by Mr. A. Acheson in *The Lost Years of Shakespeare* (1920). The data for construction are the facts that by 1592 Shakespeare appears as already a successful playwright, attacked and defended by other playwrights, and that a year later he dedicated a poem, "the first heir of my invention", to the Earl of Southampton. Mr. Acheson endeavours to make probable (1) that Shakespeare joined, during 1591, Lord Pembroke's company of players, "becoming its leader and chief producer of plays"; (2) that he made acquaintance with Southampton by 1591, on the occasion of Elizabeth's progress at Cowdray, the festivities of which are referred to (he holds) in *Love's Labour's Lost*; (3) that among his enemies of this time was, in particular, John Florio (whose *Montaigne* he afterwards possessed), and that Florio is satirized both as Armado in that play and as Parolles in *All's Well* (the probable later title of the *Love's Labour's Won* mentioned by Meres), and finally as Falstaff. The last equation, in particular, illustrates Mr. Acheson's fearlessness. Falstaff, as is well known, originally bore the name of Oldcastle. Mr. Acheson is "convinced that Shakespeare intentionally made the caricature of John Florio more transparent by choosing a name having the same initials as his,

The  
"Lost Years"



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and furthermore, that in altering the historical name Fastolfe to Falstaff he intended to indicate Florio's relations with Southampton as a *false-stafe*, a misleader of youth".

The most important gain, however, in regard to these "lost" years is a negative one. The theory that Shakespeare, before joining the theatre, spent some time as a lawyer's clerk, though unsupported by a shred of evidence, stubbornly held its ground, especially among lawyers, in view of Lord Campbell's authoritative assertion (*Shakespeare's Legal Acquirements*, 1859) that Shakespeare's allusions to law everywhere showed the knowledge of an expert. The argument was eagerly seized upon by the Baconians as a clinching proof that "Shakespeare" had been written by the great Lord Chancellor, and not by "the Stratford Clown". But Mr. Charles Allen (*Notes on the Bacon-Shakespeare Question*, 1900), and later Mr. J. M. Robertson (*The Baconian Heresy*, 1913), have shown that Shakespeare's legal allusions abound in inaccuracies. That his enormously assimilative intellect laid hold of a host of floating legal phrases, even that the little drama of a trial at law interested his imagination, is clear enough; he was not more intimate with the law than with a dozen other professions. Such allusions are sometimes magically touched to beauty—like that well-known one where the dull routine of an assize serves to convey the poet's exquisite sense of friendship, as in

"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past".

But any number of such allusions are less significant than the romantic travesties of law of which we are spectators in the Venice of Portia and the Vienna of Angelo. Shakespeare the lawyer may henceforward be dismissed to the limbo of finally discredited superstitions; the poet in whose crucible the dustiest of legal formulas turned to gold, remains.

Life in London

§ 6. While the course of Shakespeare's literary career had been made out with substantial success, and in considerable detail, before the close of the century, the circumstances of his life in London, during those twenty years, remained little less obscure at the end than at the beginning, and any further light seemed beyond hope. But an American from the Far West cherished a doughtier and, as it proved, a juster faith in the existence of undiscovered information. In 1910 Dr. C. W. Wallace, after months of indefatigable research in the Public Record office, found evidence bearing upon Shakespeare's life at two periods, 1604 and 1612. At the later



date he appeared as witness in a law-suit in which the parties were one Montjoy, a Huguenot refugee, in business in Silver Street, Cheapside, and Bellott, a former apprentice of Montjoy's, now husband of his daughter. In 1604, another witness attested, "one Mr. Shakespeare, laye (i.e. lodged) in Montjoy's house, and was thus acquainted with the circumstances of Bellott's marriage (in November of that year), the terms of which, it was alleged by the son-in-law, Montjoy had failed to carry out. Bellott had, it seems, married with hesitation; and the above witness, a former maid-servant of Montjoy's, gave in her evidence the piquant information that Mr. Shakespeare, Montjoy's lodger, had attempted, at the mother's persuasion, to overcome his reluctance. He was now called in—no longer a working playwright lodging in the city but a landowner and "Gentleman" of Stratford—to bear witness to the "goodwill and affection" formerly shown by Montjoy to the apprentice who now sought, it was alleged, to repudiate his marriage contract.

It would be idle to seek any far-reaching significance in these facts. How long Shakespeare "lay" in Montjoy's house, and whether after as well as before November, 1604, we do not know. Nevertheless, this momentary glimpse of him in the London Huguenot's household remains the one passage, at once authentic and intimate, in his entire London life. Even Fuller's famous account, at second or third hand, of his debates with Ben Jonson, may owe we know not how much to the historian's genius for witty presentation, and cannot be placed on a level, for authenticity, with this documented evidence from a court of justice.

§ 7. A less intrinsic, but perhaps more curious, interest belongs to the principal addition which has been made to our knowledge of Shakespeare's last years of retirement at Stratford. Early in 1613, the poet-actor, now a substantial country gentleman, was invited by the Earl of Rutland to take part, with his friend and fellow-actor Richard Burbage, in providing an *impresa*, or shield with emblematic device and inscription, for an impending Tournament at Belvoir Castle. Rutland, a nobleman of literary tastes, was a close friend of Shakespeare's early patron, the Earl of Southampton, as well as an assiduous frequenter of the performances at the Globe. It was thus not unnatural that he should call in the wit of Shakespeare and the well-known pictorial skill of Burbage to enable him to shine on an occasion of peculiar splendour, when he was to tilt in presence of the king. The Tournament took place on 31st March, 1613, and on that day the sum of "xliiij*s*" in gold was

Last Years



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paid to "Mr. Shakespeare" and the like sum to Burbage. These payments are entered in the household account books of Belvoir, and were first made known by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in its Report upon the MSS. there. Unfortunately all that is known of the *impresa* itself, in spite of its illustrious origin, is that it failed entirely to attract the interest of Sir Henry Wotton (who was present and wrote an account of the tilting to a friend), if it did not help to provoke his sarcastic reflections upon "some" of the *imprese*, that they were "so dark that their meaning is not yet understood, unless perchance that were their meaning, not to be understood".<sup>1</sup> But for Rutland, charging in the lists, or riding in procession before the king, it doubtless meant something that his motto had been furnished by the famous playwright of the king's men, who just twenty years before had dedicated "the first heir of his invention" to his friend and brother-earl, Southampton.

Only one other flash of the searchlight will detain us. It discovers Shakespeare once more in the city, in the last year of his life, taking part, with six others, in a Chancery suit for the return of certain legal documents relating to his house-property in Blackfriars. The suit was successful, the defendant being required by the Court (22nd May, 1615) to return the documents. The matter is of interest to us only as further illustrating Shakespeare's promptness to litigate in defence of his rights. Eleven months later Shakespeare died.

## II. THE PUBLICATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS: THE STAGE AND THE PRESS

### (i) THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

The three types  
of Stage

§ 1. No branch of Shakespeare-learning has provoked, during this period, so much patient research, keen argument, and ingenious speculation as the conditions and history of the Elizabethan stage. Fresh light has been thrown upon the circumstances of dramatic performance at each of the three types of theatre in which his works are known to have been played—the Court stage at Whitehall and other royal palaces, the "private", and also relatively aristocratic, theatres, and the "public" playhouses. Much is

<sup>1</sup> The whole incident was related and commented on by Sir Sidney Lee in *The Times*, 27th Dec., 1905, and more summarily in the later editions of his *Life*.



known also of theatres of both the latter classes, such as the first Blackfriars house, the Fortune, and the Swan, in which his plays, jealously preserved by his own (the Lord Chamberlain's) company, were never acted, and of the other companies, for whom, so far as is known, he never wrote. The three types of theatre were definitely distinct in social grade; it was only round the "public" stages, for instance, that the London 'prentices "thundered", "fought for bitten apples" (*Hen. VIII*, v. 4. 65). But all alike enjoyed the advantage of the well-known royal favour for plays, and stood in tacit alliance, notwithstanding frequent sharp interventions of authority in closing theatres or forbidding plays, against the general Puritan enemy of all, established in the city magistracy.

§ 2. The performances at Court, in particular, have been closely studied, and with illuminating results, by M. Albert Feuillerat<sup>1</sup> and Mr. E. K. Chambers.<sup>2</sup> The Court under Elizabeth, and still more under James, was a large and an exacting consumer of plays, and the minute and elaborate accounts officially kept of the expenses enable us to picture these performances more definitely, on the whole, than any others. The scene bore no resemblance whatever to those inn-yards out of which the modern English theatre has been evolved, and from which even Shakespeare's Globe was but a step or two removed. They were played in the great hall of whatever royal palace was chosen for the performance—Whitehall, or Richmond, or Hampton Court, or Greenwich, or Windsor—a special stage of stout timber being built at one end. A door at the back of the stage for entrances and exits was sometimes provided by actually breaking an opening in the solid wall. The spectators were accommodated in ascending tiers of seats ranged round the walls. The queen sat on a tapestried dais, which was sometimes in the middle of the hall, sometimes actually on the stage. The air was perfumed with essences, and a forest of candles and torches made the place (we are told) "as bright as day". The stage was equipped with lavish profusion, in some respects beyond that of our own day. The costliest material was used for dresses, and the passion for seeing actors wearing splendid clothes so far got the better of the desire to see them resemble the persons they were supposed to represent, that Irish kerns, whose misery was proverbial, appeared in shirts of yellow sarcenet and tunics of cloth of gold fringed with green silk.<sup>3</sup> It is generally supposed that

<sup>1</sup> *Le Bureau des Menus-Plaisirs*, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> "Court Performances before Queen Elizabeth" (*Mod. Lang. Rev.*, 1907); "Court Performances under James I" (*ibid.* 1909).

<sup>3</sup> Feuillerat, *Bureau des Menus-Plaisirs*, p. 58.



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little or no "scenery" in the modern sense accompanied this lavish provision of "disguises". But M. Feuillerat's documents make clear that at the Court performances, at least, this was far from being the case. There was, it is true, no shifting of scenes in our sense. But "scenes", elaborately painted on cloth, and representing all the localities supposed in the plot, they had. Only, instead of the scenes being shifted while the players remained in the same place, the whole series of scenes or "houses", as they were called, was set up round the stage at the outset, and the players moved from one to the other in succession. Was that a breach of realism? Doubtless; but hardly a greater than is involved when the modern stage "becomes", in a few minutes, places hundreds of miles apart. For the rest, the Revels' accounts show that, long before the closing period of Elizabeth's reign, the Court performances made use of scenes representing country-houses, castles, towns, large cities, emperors' palaces, Rome, Scotland, mountains, forests, hollow trees, the sky, clouds, the sun. And the resources of painting were supplemented by elaborate imitative construction, or downright literal truth. Actual trees, brought to the Court on carts, would be planted to stand for a forest. Huge erections of carpentry, planks nailed to a timber frame, with men inside visible through the openings, would stand for a castle with its garrison, or a prison with its captives, or an assembly with its senators.<sup>1</sup>

These Court entertainments have a direct bearing upon the Shakesperean drama in two ways. In the first place, the plays performed at Court were, in the main, pieces already approved by the audiences of the popular theatres. These pieces thus received the advantage of the elaborate scenic equipment of the Court stage. Shakespeare's plays, then, among the rest—and none were in greater request there—were mounted "with their apt houses of painted canvas and properties incident such as might most lively express the effect of the histories played".<sup>2</sup> And it is hardly to be believed that the players, some of whom had a direct share in the profits of the theatre, made no attempt to emulate on their own stage the lavish equipment of the Court. In any case, that example, constantly before their eyes, promoted the steady growth in richness and splendour of equipment which we know actually took place. So far as the Court taste directly influenced the production of plays, it bred only the thin and sapless plant of the neo-classic drama. But in this indirect way

<sup>1</sup> Feuillerat, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Feuillerat, p. 85.



it stimulated the activity of the more vigorous native growth. It is now held probable by critics of such standing as Reynolds and Schelling that the public theatres at the close of Elizabeth's reign fell little short in splendour of the Court performances.

The second point has more direct literary interest. The plays offered by the companies for performance at Court were submitted some weeks beforehand to the Master of the Revels for selection and censorship. He summoned the actors before him, made them play through their repertory, and chose the best pieces; an hour-glass being used to ensure strict compliance with the limit of (probably) two hours. He then, in person or by deputy, read the chosen plays repeatedly through, correcting and amending matters "not convenient to be shown before Her Majesty", or returning the MS. to the Company for "reform".<sup>1</sup> It may be assumed that the "reforms" thus introduced or required tended to assimilate the plays to the aristocratic type of taste in drama, of which the Court, the universities, and the Inns of Court were the nurseries, and the classicizing plays of Daniel a probably extreme example. The financial and social advantages attending performances at Court made the quiet pressure of this official influence upon the Companies by no means negligible. It told both upon the manager who commissioned a play, and on the writer who made it. And if, on the whole, it was the popular theatre, with its crowd of talented playwrights, and its enormous fecundity, that drew the high-bred but unfruitful dilettanti of the Court in its wake, we must not forget that the drama of the theatres reached its Shakesperean consummation only after the genius of Marlowe and Kyd had enriched and ennobled the ruder shows they found with vital elements both of substance and of form, till then only known to the Court or university stage. The Senecan tragic motives, the murdered kin and ghosts crying out for vengeance, of Kyd, and the blank verse of Marlowe, are both presupposed in *Hamlet*. The brilliant prose dialogue of Lyly's court-plays is no less presupposed in *Love's Labour's Lost* and even in *Much Ado*.

§ 3. The most important and the best known of the private stages was that of Blackfriars, owned by Shakespeare's Company, but for several years leased to the organizer of the boy-players who were at the date of *Hamlet* its most formidable rivals. Our knowledge of the private stage has been materially enlarged by Professor C. W. Wallace (*The First London Theatre*, 1913, and elsewhere). The term "private", it is now clear, was first adopted as a self-

The  
Private Theatres

<sup>1</sup> Feuillerat, p. 55.



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protective device, plays "shewed in the *private house* of any nobleman, citizen, or gentleman" being expressly exempted from the penalties laid down by the Act of Common Council in 1574, for performing plays within the liberties of the city. The theatres known as "private" were thus, like those of the Court performances, ordinary rooms protected from the weather, artificially lighted, and with seats for the audience, but just as available as the "public" stages to those who were ready to pay their higher prices. Dr. Wallace has shown that in the very year (1576) of the establishment of the first "public" stage—the famous Theater of Burbage, outside the city precincts—a "private" theatre was, with appropriate protective disguise, warily started within them. This was the "first" (and previously unknown) Blackfriars theatre, a room in the old frater of Blackfriars priory, previously occupied by Lord Cobham, and was leased by Richard Farrant, master of the choir-boys ("Children of the Chapel") at Windsor. Here, under the pretext of training the choir-boys, performances were in fact given between 1576 and 1584, when this little theatre was closed. Thirteen years later, Burbage founded in the same building the second Blackfriars "private" theatre, the fortunes of which are well known. For eleven years, the most momentous in the history of modern drama (1597–1608), it was held on lease from Burbage by the master of those "little eyases", the choir-boys of the Savoy Chapel, referred to with unusual asperity in *Hamlet*. Dr. Wallace has discovered the actual dimensions of the "room" used for the performances—66 by 44 feet; and that it had no less than three galleries. The stage was a dais extending probably across the whole breadth at one end, instead of projecting into the auditorium as in the "public" theatres. Such an arrangement would allow the abuse of sitting on the stage, practised by gallants and ironically recommended by Dekker in the *Hornbook* to "gulls", to be perpetrated without obstructing the view of the spectators. For the rest, the structural devices of inner stage, curtain, balcony, characteristic of the public theatres, were no doubt gradually introduced into the private also; many plays were acted indifferently at the one and at the other. And the Blackfriars private theatre "was in a literary sense, even apart from Shakespeare's connection with it, the most important theatre in London. Its name appears on the title-pages of over fifty quarto plays, whereas less than half that number are assigned by the publishers to the Globe."<sup>1</sup>

§ 4. But it is chiefly our knowledge of the "public" theatres that

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence and Archer in *Shakespeare's England*, ii, 291.



has profited by the keen investigation of the Elizabethan stage conditions carried on since 1904. The distinction of having started it, though his theory is now generally discredited, belongs to C. Brodmeier, whose *The Shakesperean Stage according to the old Stage-directions* (German) appeared in that year. Important landmarks in the discussion are G. F. Reynolds's *Some Principles of Elizabethan Staging*, 1905; W. Archer, "What we know of the Elizabethan Stage" (*Quart. Rev.*, Apr. 1908); Neuendorff's *The English popular stage in the age of Shakespeare*, 1909; W. J. Lawrence's *The Elizabethan Playhouse*, 1912-3; and the article by Lawrence and Archer on "The Playhouse" in *Shakespeare's England*, 1916.

All discussion of the arrangement of the public theatre starts from the admitted fact that its stage was not, like ours, a picture enclosed in a frame, with the audience in front, but a platform, projecting into the auditorium, with the audience closing round it on three or even four sides. It is also agreed that at the back of the stage was a raised gallery, serving now for the battlements from which citizens of Angers brave the besieging kings in *King John*, now for the balcony from which Juliet discourses to Romeo, or Gloucester between his bishops to the London citizens, now for musicians or actors looking on. But controversy begins when we ask how the succession of scenes with different properties and often in different places was contrived. That this must have been extraordinarily rapid is proved by the fact that two hours was the normal time of performance—"the two hours' traffic of our stage" as it is called by the Prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*. Although scenery was insignificant, when it existed at all, the stage properties and the dresses were extremely elaborate. The difficulty of explaining how they could be rapidly changed between successive scenes led Brodmeier to propound his so-called alternation theory. According to this, a curtain, hung parallel to the front of the stage some distance back, divided it into two portions, front and rear. When desired, the rear portion could thus be cut off from the view of the majority of the audience, and thus a scene which required "properties" could be arranged while one which did not require them was being enacted in the front portion. At the close of the "unpropertied" scene, the curtain would then simply be drawn back, and the "propertied" scene follow immediately. During the performance of this scene, no further preparations could be made on the stage, the whole of it being now exposed. Hence an "unpropertied" scene, it was contended, must have followed, the



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curtain being once more drawn, and the next scene, a "propertied" one, prepared for as before. In other words, the theory required in every play an "alternation" of "propertied" and "unpropertied" scenes, and Brodmeier attempted to show that this kind of sequence actually prevailed. But the attempt breaks down altogether. Dr. Lawrence's authoritative judgment may be quoted:

"Though a few cases can be cited in which 'propertied' and 'unpropertied' scenes do seem to alternate, there is probably not a single play in which the alternation is consistently carried through, while there are numberless cases in which one 'propertied' scene follows immediately on the heels of another."<sup>1</sup> A not less fatal objection follows from the structural position of the stage with relation to the audience. Since the audience crowded round three sides of the stage, a curtain hung anywhere but at the rear would shut off every alternate scene from the view of a large section of the spectators; a deprivation scarcely compensated by the fact that they would have a clear view of the preparations for the scene to follow, which the curtain was intended to hide.

It is certain, however, from countless contemporary stage-directions, that a curtain was used, and that it could be drawn back to disclose, to the whole audience, fresh persons and previously unseen places or rooms. Thus the tomb of the Capulets, with Juliet lying in it, is disclosed, and Romeo and Paris enter. A curtain is often actually mentioned. One hangs in front of Prospero's cell, and is drawn back by Prospero when he welcomes Alonso to "this cell, my court",<sup>2</sup> where Ferdinand and Miranda are seen playing at chess. It is now generally agreed that the requirements in these and a host of similar cases can only be met by assuming a recess, an "alcove", or as Lawrence prefers, a "corridor" with openings for entrance and exit at either end, behind the stage proper; and that the curtain constantly mentioned hung across the entrance to this recess, and not across any portion of the main stage.

This assumption satisfies all the situations implied in the extant texts of the Elizabethan drama from the inception of the regular theatre. It would hardly have excited controversy but for the well-known interior view of the Swan theatre left by a Dutch visitor, de Witt, about 1600, which shows at the back of the stage, instead of any such recess, a blank wall with two closed doors. The stage itself is, moreover, here actually divided into a front and back portion in so far as two pillars, half-way along the sides,

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare's England*, ii, 300.

<sup>2</sup> His latest editors actually supply a stage-direction, "with his hand on the curtain of the cave".



support a kind of penthouse overhanging the rear stage only. Between these pillars the advocates of the "alternation" theory hung their curtain, with the impossible consequences indicated above; there is no suggestion of such a thing in the print. But it is now agreed that the de Witt drawing cannot be held authoritative for all the stages of that day, in particular not for Shakespeare's stage at the Globe, here alone in question. On the one hand it was apparently done from memory; further, even if it accurately reproduces the stage of the Swan, this was not necessarily typical.

It will be seen in a later section (III. i. 2), how the more precise knowledge of the stage, of which the main features have been sketched, reacted upon the interpretation of dramatic action and character in Shakespeare.

## (ii) THE PRINTED PLAY; QUARTOS AND FOLIOS; SHAKESPEARE'S HANDWRITING

§ 1. First "published" in the playhouse, Shakespeare's plays are known to posterity only through the medium of printed texts. If the playhouse impressed its character upon the play, the play had to traverse a further course full of hazard on its way into print. Modern scholarship has made important additions to our knowledge of both phases in the genesis of the Shakesperean play as we know it, and the result, in the latter case also, directly affects at many points our understanding and interpretation of the play.

Our Texts of  
Shakespeare

The plays and poems have come down to us, as is well known, in one, or both, of two forms, the "Quartos" and the "Folios". Quarto editions of about half the plays appeared during the course of Shakespeare's active career, and later. Several of them are grossly imperfect, and were probably issued by "pirates", without the authority and against the will of Company and author. The case of the rest has been prejudiced by this fact. The First Folio, on the other hand, was issued by two of his fellow-actors, professedly with every kind of loyal care, but seven years after his death. Nineteenth-century criticism stood, on the whole, for the Folio as the most authoritative text. But some of its deficiencies were obvious, even glaring. English critics who rejected, as they became during the century more and more disposed to reject, Shakespeare's authorship, wholly or in part, of *Titus Andronicus*, *Henry VIII*, *1 Hen. VI*, *Timon of Athens*, *Taming of the Shrew*, could not allow any unquestioned authority to the Folio which included them all, or any respect to the claim of its editors to have used every-



where their author's MS. It was certain in any case that many undoubtedly authentic passages were omitted in the Folio and retained in the Quartos.

The principal feature of Shakesperean bibliographical criticism during the twentieth century has been to invert this relation, and restore the highest authority, so far as they are available and are not evidently pirated, to the Quartos. The leader in this changed direction is Mr. A. W. Pollard. Its conclusions have been applied and extended in detail by Mr. J. Dover Wilson in the *New Shakespeare*, 1920 and now in progress.

The Quartos,  
"Good" and  
"Bad"

§2. Mr. Pollard began by setting aside the group of confessedly imperfect and unauthorized texts, which he called the "bad" Quartos: *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), the *Merry Wives*, *Henry V*, *Hamlet* (1603), and *Pericles*. The remainder, fourteen in number, he distinguished as the "good" Quartos, claiming for them on the whole an authority superior to that of the Folio. They were, in the first place, with two exceptions, authorized by the Company of Players, and therefore printed directly from versions of the plays in their possession. Further, Mr. Pollard contends that these versions are likely to have been not transcripts made for the purpose, at much cost of money and time, but the prompt-copy actually used in the theatre, which itself was substantially the autograph MS. of the author. His reasoning is contained in a series of books from 1909 onwards, especially in his now almost classical account of *Shakespeare's Fight with the Pirates* (1917). It is shown, for instance (though many of the facts have long been known), that the printed Quartos often give us the prompter's notes made on the prompt-copy and accidentally not excised; as when "Will Kemp" (the famous clown of the Company) is named at the head of a speech instead of the character he played. It is evident, too, that in many cases the play was submitted to a censor in the author's autograph copy, which then, with his excisions or alterations, became the prompt-copy. There were reasons for this frugality, apart from the cost of making duplicates; for the risk of piratic publication was much reduced if the play existed only in a single, closely guarded, manuscript, which was used for all purposes, censorship, performance, and finally — untidy, blotched, annotated, but authentic—for the press.

It will be seen that the importance of this conclusion is very great, since it brings us, through large tracts of a play, save for the interposition of a single person—the compositor—face to face with Shakespeare's written text. It is true that, before serving as



prompt-copy, the author's MS. was liable to "cuts", abridgments, rearrangements to fit it for different circumstances or occasions. But these, in Shakespeare's case, are mostly not beyond the reach of detection by competent criticism; and their existence does not reduce the importance of the conclusion that we have proximate access to Shakespeare's actual writing.

§3. The "bad" Quartos, in spite of the epithet, have also an extraordinary interest, since the problem of their origin admits of no simple solution, and one at least, the First Quarto of *Hamlet*, cannot be explained wholly by "corruption", whether on the part of printers, surreptitious note-takers in the theatre, or botching "editors" in a pirate publisher's office. During the later nineteenth century, two schools of criticism hotly debated this problem. The one, including some of the most distinguished Shakespereans of Germany, insisted that "corruption", in one or all of these senses, was sufficient to explain all the divergences of these Quartos from the later and accepted texts of the Folio or of later Quartos. The other school pressed home the fact that some of the later Quartos of these plays (as in particular the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*) show divergences (such as alterations of names, changes in character) most naturally explained by later revision on the part of the author.

The "Bad"  
Quartos

The closer scrutiny of the economy of the Elizabethan play-houses and printing houses, for which we are indebted mainly to Mr. Pollard and his followers, has brought this nineteenth-century controversy some steps nearer to settlement. It is now generally held that we have, in these cases, to do with (1) abridgments of the original, full-length play, effected in the theatre; these abridgments having been there (2) partially revised by Shakespeare, as when "Corambis" was renamed Polonius; (3) piratically printed by the mediation of some actor who had played in the full-length piece. This player go-between who sold his professional knowledge of the text, and particularly his own part, to the pirates, is the villain of the bad-quarto-drama, new style. His emergence is due to the acute discovery that in some of these plays the normal imperfections of the text almost wholly disappear in some one rôle, an inequality easily and conclusively explained if this part of the text was furnished by one who, in the ordinary way of business, had it by heart.

§4. Before leaving the Quartos, a somewhat curious point in Elizabethan bibliography relating to them may be briefly adverted to. Three years after Shakespeare's death, in 1619, there is evidence,

Other  
Quartos



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as is now believed, of an intention on the part of a London publisher, Pavier, to issue a quarto collection of his plays—anticipating the Folio by four years. Four Quartos, the *Merry Wives* and three plays of partial or doubtful title to authenticity, but all described as “by William Shakespeare, Gent.”, are known to have been issued in 1619. But five other Quartos, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Henry V*, and *Lear*, with one pseudo-Shakesperean piece, bearing earlier dates, are suspected to have been in reality issued in the same year. Dr. W. W. Greg, the author of this theory, has shown by a close examination of the paper and imprints that they are identical in fabric with the volumes admittedly of 1619, and that the publisher's name and dates were forged. His view has been accepted by our chief authority in Elizabethan bibliography, Mr. Pollard.

### The Folio

§ 5. The same considerations which raised the authority of the better class of Quartos disclosed further deficiencies in the Folio, or threw those already recognized into more salient relief. Not only were the claims of the editors to have printed uniformly from Shakespeare's MSS. clearly untenable; their edition was shown to be a compilation of texts of varying character and origin, handled on no uniform system, while their most definite attempt at uniformity—the division into acts and scenes—is widely suspected to have been contrary to Shakespeare's own practice. For about half the plays no contemporary Quarto, good or bad, was in existence, and the editors were thus relegated to a prompt-copy which had been undergoing all the vicissitudes of the green-room for a dozen years since its author's retirement from the stage, and seven years since his death, or which was even lost altogether, and had to be clumsily replaced by the separate actors' parts, put together as best they might.<sup>1</sup> The division into acts and scenes, found in all but six of the Folio plays, seems to have been regularly adopted by the King's Men after Shakespeare left them. It is found in none of the Quartos printed in his lifetime, the latest of which is *Troilus and Cressida* (1609). That this important structural principle, supported by classical and Italian drama, and rapidly becoming current on the contemporary stage, was rejected by Shakespeare, may not yet be sufficiently proved; but it has been shown that the Folio division between acts sometimes breaks up a continuous scene. Thus at the close of Act iii in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the pairs of Athenian lovers, who

<sup>1</sup> “At least one or two of the Folio plays suggest such an origin” (Dover Wilson, *Introd. to The Tempest*, p. xxxv).



in the modern text "lie down and sleep" towards the close of Act iii, scene 4, and are found sleeping at the opening of Act iv, are said in the Folio stage direction to "sleep all the Act", i.e. the interval between the acts. One fears that these innocent couples, if they "slept" on the curtainless stage, watched from three sides by the audience, might have been a mark for mischief less poetic than Puck's magic juice. It is probable that Puck's song ("On the ground sleep sound, &c.") alone intervened between Hermia's lying down and the entrance of Titania and Bottom.

Elizabethan  
Punctuation

§ 6. While the revaluation of the Shakespeare Quartos has been brought about chiefly by the closer study of the customs of the Elizabethan playhouses and printing shops, a more open-minded study of the old texts themselves has thrown unexpected light upon Shakespeare's—and incidentally upon the general Elizabethan—mode of delivering verse. Mr. Percy Simpson in his little book on *Shakesperean Punctuation* (1911) has shown that punctuation in the old texts, for the most part irreconcilable with grammar and thence habitually "corrected" by editors, is nevertheless not careless or ignorant, but determined by a different intention, as a guide for the actor to the rhythmic and rhetorical, not to the grammatical, delivery of his lines. The colons, semi-colons, commas, and brackets indicated pauses of various lengths in the rhythmic movement; they had nothing to do with syntax. Inverted commas were used, not to mark quotation, but to indicate "sentences"—i.e. "sententious" or apposite aphorisms such as are launched at one another by the Duke and Brabantio in the senate-house scene of *Othello*, i. 3. These "signs", in the words of the only editor who has as yet attempted to reproduce them in a modern Shakespeare text, "are in fact stage-directions in shorthand". They tell the actor when to pause and for how long. They guide his intonation, they indicate the emphatic word, often enough they denote "stage-business". In the Cambridge *New Shakespeare*, an attempt has even been made to supply the "stage-business" which these pauses do not so much "denote" as allow time for. It is evident that this procedure opens a hazardously easy way to the vagaries of a personal interpretation; and the liberal introduction of new stage-business in the texts of this edition is its most questionable and most generally questioned feature. But these principles of punctuation,<sup>1</sup> designed for actor rather than for reader, clearly go to confirm the view that the plays were in general first printed from prompt-copies.

§ 7. In 1916 a further, and far more sensational, contribution

Shakespeare's  
Handwriting

<sup>1</sup> Dover Wilson, *Introd. to The Tempest*.



## RECENT SHAKESPEREAN INVESTIGATION

was made to the textual side of Shakesperean bibliography by the publication of Sir Edward Maunde Thompson's monograph on *Shakespeare's Handwriting*. Any serious attempt to cope with the still numerous passages where the received text is obscure or plainly wrong, was hampered, if not frustrated, by the apparent loss of every scrap of his handwriting, with the exception of five hurried or cramped signatures appended to his will or to other legal documents. The progress of scientific paleography during the last generation, by disclosing the necessary dependence of emendation upon handwriting, made acutely sensible a loss which the older emendators had cheerfully ignored. Even Theobald hardly suspected that his own ingenuity, applied to a printed text, was not an infallible solvent for any textual knot. But up till 1910 modern students of the text, though now increasingly conscious of the deficiency, were helpless to remedy it. In that year Dr. C. W. Wallace discovered a sixth signature, written not only earlier than any previously known (11th May, 1612) and thus nearer to the date of his dramatic work, but also under more normal conditions, and hence in a freer style. In Sir E. Thompson's view this discovery—otherwise so important for Shakespeare's biography—provided the key to the determination of the "leading factor" in the problem of Shakespeare's handwriting.

Armed with this key, the critic examined anew some pages of the scanty surviving MS. remnant of the Elizabethan drama, which had long been surmised, on general grounds, to be Shakespeare's work. These formed one of several "additions" made, by unnamed writers, to the play of *Sir Thomas More*, originally composed, it is held, by a well-known playwright of third-rate rank, Antony Munday. The MS. play, with the several "additions" all by different hands, is now preserved in MS. Harleian 7368, in the British Museum. The "addition" here in question was first ascribed to Shakespeare by a prominent Shakesperean of the mid-nineteenth century, Richard Simpson, in 1871, on the ground of the general resemblance of the handwriting to his signatures. Little notice was taken of the suggestion at the time, nor was the minute study of handwriting then far enough advanced to admit of any assured conclusion, even had the new signature of Shakespeare then been known. Sir E. M. Thompson undertook the examination of the problem under better auspices. Applying a very minute and precise paleographical technique to a comparison of the handwriting of the "addition" with that of the signatures, he concludes that they belong to the same hand, that the scene from *Sir Thomas More* is



therefore Shakespeare's work, and that we are thus in possession of a knowledge of his autograph amply sufficient to control all emendation of the printed text. Other questions, deliberately excluded by this eminent paleographer, must necessarily be faced before his conclusion is accepted. In particular, the literary question—has the work Shakesperean character? And with this again is closely connected the question of the date of the "addition". The quality of the scene—a rising of London prentices quelled by the sage and politic intervention of Sir Thomas—is reconcilable enough with the authorship of Shakespeare in his "workshop" phase—the Shakespeare say of 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, but not with that of the mature Shakespeare of *Henry IV* or even of *Richard II*. On the other hand it is doubtful whether the MS. can be dated so early as the former group of plays. The question for the present, then, remains undecided. But its extraordinary interest is evident, and all qualified critics agree that the handwriting of the More "addition" and that of Shakespeare's signatures belong at least to the same class.

Statistical  
Bibliography

§ 8. In conclusion may be mentioned the important work done in recent years in ascertaining, and describing with bibliographical precision, the extant examples of the Folios and Quartos of Shakespeare. Sir Sidney Lee led the way with his *Census of Extant Copies of the First Folio* (1902), enumerating 160 copies and their present owners. A supplement in 1906 included fourteen more, and more than 180 are now known, less than a score of which, however, are technically perfect. A similar census of the Quartos was carried out by Mr. Pollard. Quite recently all this information has been put together, with supplements of her own, by Miss H. C. Bartlett, a coadjutor of Mr. Pollard's, in her *Mr. William Shakespeare: Original and Early Editions of his Quartos and Folios* (Oxford, 1922). A peculiar piquancy belongs to the recital, by Mr. F. Madan, of the history of *The Original Bodleian Copy of the First Folio*, which, acquired by chance, was sold, after the appearance of the Third Folio, for a trifle, and repurchased, after its discovery in a country-house, in 1906.

The present section has trenched necessarily upon a class of Shakespeare problems which involve further criteria than those which relate to manuscript and print—the determination, namely, of the extent and limits of Shakespeare's authentic work—or, as it may be more briefly called, of the Shakesperean canon. Some daring attacks upon these problems are noticed in the following section.



(iii) AUTHENTIC AND UNAUTHENTIC WORK IN SHAKESPEARE

Determination  
of the  
Shakespeare  
Canon

§ 1. All complete judgment upon Shakespeare as a writer, all final criticism of his drama and of his poetry, postulates that we have a perfectly defined corpus of his writings to base our criticism and judgment upon. Yet almost from the first a kind of nebulous aura of dubious or putative writing has surrounded the body of unmistakably authentic work, and the problem of deciding on the claims of this dubious work, and thus determining the Shakespeare canon has, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, incessantly engaged the acumen and scholarship of Shakespeare critics. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, this problem, far from being definitely solved, has started up afresh in new and unsuspected quarters, and the limits of the canon form one of the most living questions of Shakespeare criticism to-day. \*

The first step towards the determination of Shakespeare's authentic work, and the basis for all the rest, was taken by his first editors, Heming and Condell, when they published what purported to be the entire work of their friend and fellow-actor in the First Folio. The judgment of two men thus intimately associated with the poet as to what he had and what he had not written, naturally has great weight; and with some scholars, especially in Germany, it has outweighed all the most confident decisions, in a different sense, of modern criticism. Nevertheless, the authority of the First Folio has since the middle of the nineteenth century steadily declined, and when Swinburne in the 'seventies let loose the picturesque exuberance of his denunciation upon these impudent pretenders, he merely put a high colour upon what was becoming in substance the common creed.

The composition of this Folio was found defective both in what it ignored and what it included. Two plays of unusual power, *Arden of Feversham* and *Edward III*, were claimed for Shakespeare, tentatively or confidently, by a series of nineteenth-century critics, with Swinburne at their head; while in a third, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which was published in his own day as the work of a fellow-dramatist Fletcher, it became usual to assign him an important share.<sup>1</sup>

But their gravest and most damning default was in their wrong inclusions.

<sup>1</sup> The whole of the plays once ascribed to Shakespeare, but not included in the First or later Folios, have been edited, with an authoritative commentary, by Professor Tucker Brooke in *The Shakespeare Apocrypha* (1908).



✓ At the opening of the period here in review, the bulk of English scholars were agreed in holding: (1) that another hand was concerned, with Shakespeare's, in *Timon of Athens*, *Pericles*, and *Henry VIII*, in all of which, however, his share was indubitable, and belonged to his grandest work; (2) that *1 Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus* were substantially the work of other hands, with slight, if any, traces of his.

All of these plays were, however, in Germany universally accepted as authentic, on the authority of the Folio.

Such results could not be final. They compelled the attempt to identify the writer or writers whose work had thus been accepted by Shakespeare's editors. They also encouraged the expectation that closer analysis might discover traces of other hands even in the still undisputed plays.

§ 2. In both these lines of inquiry a leading share belongs to Mr. J. M. Robertson, a critic of remarkable learning, ingenuity, and resource, shown not in this field only. In 1903 he addressed himself to the determination of the authorship of *Titus Andronicus*, and in *Did Shakespeare write Titus Andronicus?* concluded, after a minute examination of diction and vocabulary, by referring it to Peele, Greene, and Marlowe in common, thus supporting the rejection of Shakesperean authorship at which the great body of English scholars had arrived on purely æsthetic grounds.

Fresh attacks  
upon the  
Folio tradition:  
Robertson,  
Acheson

Peele and Greene and Marlowe, as contemporaries who did not survive Shakespeare's early manhood, could only come into question as literary partners in his earlier plays. But three Folio plays of his last years, as we have seen, invited if they did not compel the assumption of a fellow-worker. The nineteenth century confidently found Fletcher in *Henry VIII*, and suspected adulteration by Middleton in *Macbeth*. The twentieth century has not discredited these attributions, but it is inclined to discover Shakespeare's coadjutors less often in Greene or Marlowe than in George Chapman. Mr. A. Acheson supported with much new matter Minto's suggestion that Chapman was the "rival poet" of the Sonnets. Mr. Robertson, in 1917, attempted to carry this theory further, and to show that Chapman was both a collaborator with Shakespeare in *Timon of Athens*, and the sole author of the poem which closes the 'Sonnet' volume, *A Lover's Complaint*. In this perplexing piece passages of Shakesperean power and even his grandeur of verse-technique are disconcertingly combined with a want of grip in the conduct of the whole, and a frequent abruptness and "grittiness" of style, which are eminently non-Shakesperean. Professor J. W. Mackail, in



*English Association Essays III*, was the first to offer a reasoned argument against the authenticity of the *Complaint*; he suggested as the author the "rival poet" of the Sonnets, frequently as we have seen identified with Chapman; and it is this hypothesis which Mr. Robertson, five years later, took up and elaborated in his monograph on Chapman.

More recently still (in *The Shakespeare Canon*, 1922), Mr. Robertson has published the results of his attack upon the traditional "Canon" at three further points, already, with others, indicated at the close of his Chapman volume. He there urged: (1) that *Richard III*, in which Marlowe's influence is universally admitted, was actually Marlowe's work; (2) that in *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar* substantial portions of older plays, completed by Shakespeare, survive. This is not the place for a discussion or even for a detailed indication of his grounds. His admirable erudition and faculty of combination are discounted by a legal type of acumen, less serviceable in these inquiries, which finds the slightest inconsistency a ground for assuming the presence of a second author, or a surviving trace of some otherwise unknown play. Three such plays are thus required to account for discrepancies in *Julius Caesar*. To give one example, the motives of the conspiracy are not everywhere consistently stated. In the first three acts Cæsar's crime is that he "would be king"; in the fourth, Brutus declares that they struck him "but for supporting robbers" (iv. 3. 22). Brutus is certainly inconsistent, but passion often makes men so, and no reader of the play feels that here we have, in the writer, "a new point of view", still less "a new Brutus". Yet Mr. Robertson, who has already tentatively adopted the hypothesis of two earlier plays, a *Cæsar's Tragedy* and a *Cæsar's Revenge*, disposes of the problem lightly by the hypothesis of yet a third. With all this, his acute observation, if we resist his inferences, has at many points disclosed how rich, flexible, and temperamental the art of Shakespeare was, and how cautiously we must proceed in laying down for it sharply marked periods and categories.

§ 3. Fresh light has been thrown, finally, on the curious piece of allegory and symbolism which mystifies many readers on the closing page of the Globe and other modern editions—*The Phœnix and the Turtle*. The poem, which is unlike any other verse of Shakespeare's, was published with his full name in 1601, and there is no reason to doubt its authenticity. It was contributed, as is commonly believed, to a collection of verse tributes presented by Robert Chester to his patron Sir John Salisbury.



under the general title, *Love's Martyr*. Several other well-known writers contributed, in particular Marston, Chapman, and Jonson; but the persons of Salisbury and Chester themselves were hitherto obscure. In one of the *Bryn Mawr College Monographs* (No. 14, 1913), Mr. Carleton Brown has collected many poems by Chester and Salisbury, preserved in MS. at Christ Church, Oxford, and elsewhere, and thus indirectly helped us to take the measure of the literary proclivities of these amiable but not distinguished minds, and to understand the good-natured spirit in which illustrious men of letters paid indulgent compliments to the Welsh knight.

## III. CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

### (i) SHAKESPEARE'S MIND, ART, AND PERSONALITY

§ 1. The three terms specified in the heading denote rather different aspects of a single huge enigmatic subject-matter than distinct and separable topics. It is hardly possible to discuss Shakespeare under one of these aspects without calling the others into play. The interpreter of Shakespeare has to answer fundamental questions about all three. To sketch the history, then, of these interpretations is not at all like unravelling a skein of three tangled but ultimately detachable threads. The three terms themselves, moreover, in their application to Shakespeare, are shifting and variable. For one interpreter the Artist Shakespeare effaces the Man; for another, the Man, his experiences, passions, and sufferings, are the whole substance of what we call his Art. The history of Shakesperean interpretation is mainly a history of the shifting emphasis laid now upon one, now upon another of these aspects.

Meaning  
of the terms  
in relation to  
Shakespeare

Of the three, "mind" is the least open to discussion. The plays are there, once for all, an intellectual achievement without parallel, to be analysed or allegorized if we will, but not gainsaid or explained away. But our views of Shakespeare's "art", and, even more, of his "personality", depend far more upon the answer we give to questions for which no compelling evidence is available; we cannot here eliminate subjective bias; our conclusions, however probable, cannot be divested, in the last resort, of an element of speculation. The controversies that have raged in this field have accordingly been in a great degree the unfruitful debate of opponents who had no common ground. It is possible, nevertheless, to trace a slow advance towards ultimate agreement.



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These controversies, or critical quarrels, may be reduced, for our present purpose, to two; the one bearing mainly upon Shakespeare's "personality", the other primarily upon his "art". Is Shakespeare's "personality" inaccessible to us? Or does he, after all, "attend our question"? Is his work and the record of his outer life an inscrutable mask? Or is it a living countenance, which may, by qualified eyes, be read? And again, is his "art" to be explained as the expression of a great poetic intelligence developing according to an inner law, or as the result of a series of astute compliances with the calls of theatrical fashion, the suggestions of the company, and the interests of the box-office?

Both these quarrels—here stated in their extremest terms—have, during the past thirty years, assumed a somewhat altered aspect. The decline of philosophic idealism, the more historical and also the more matter-of-fact temper of Elizabethan scholarship, and its undoubted advance in severity of method, have told upon both, but especially upon the second.

The close scrutiny of the Elizabethan theatre, and of the ways of the companies and the audiences, described in the previous section, have compelled a withdrawal from the extremer types of æsthetic theory prevalent a century ago, and still flourishing with beautiful luxuriance in Dowden's classical "Mind and Art". The picture of a great artist's soul, evolving in its four successive periods, each with its expressive label, has grown less credible even to critics who, like Bradley or Croce, hardly admit any outer force to have moulded or modified the contours of Shakespeare's art at all. The dangerous trend is now in the opposite direction—towards a Shakespeare who was Globe shareholder first and last, and whose technique was a tissue of compliances with the taste of the audience in which his own taste had no part. But we are on the way to an accommodation between these extreme positions, in the sense that Shakespeare's art achieved its triumphs precisely in giving his audience all they asked for, and gloriously more.

The first controversy, on the personality of Shakespeare, has run a more chequered and indecisive course. There have been plenty of spirited encounters about issues not very clearly defined, but there has been no triumph and no rout. This indeterminate situation arises in great part from the vagueness of the terms used, and the obscurity and difficulty of the very conception of personality itself. Is personality the whole sum of acts and words by which a man is known to the world, or is it the man as he is known to himself; or, again, the man (in theological language) as he is known to God, a



metaphysical entity which his words and acts and even his self-analysis and "confessions" can never exhaust and may completely disguise or falsify? The psychology of genius is too complex, and at the present day still too imperfectly explored, to give us much help; and biography offers plenty of examples available for either side. The sceptical party point to the frequent discrepancies between artists when at their art and in their private and public life; the melancholy of the comedian off the stage; the dullness of the celebrity at home; the callous savagery in crime of an exquisite artist like Cellini. Why should not Shakespeare, too, who by his own confession looked on his actor's craft as an unworthy disguise, the stain on the dyer's hand, have been also, behind the wrappings of his playmaking and his plays, a man totally other than they would suggest? But a chorus of voices, with more poets and literary critics among them than the other, impatiently protests that no great poet could thus disguise or conceal himself; that though poetry be "feigning", such poetry as *Lear* or *Hamlet* can as little have been created in cold blood as the frescoes of Michelangelo, that Shakespeare had felt the consuming passion and also the fierce loathing for passion which flame forth in their speech.

These two quarrels have been carried on, in great part, by the same scholars, and it is interesting to see how they grouped themselves in the two encounters. On the whole, the positive and realist temper which was in the air of the time, and inspired the close and methodic study of Shakespeare's stage, looked coldly on every kind of imaginative reconstruction of his "personality". But the very contention of these stage-specialists, that stage conditions and theatre interests, and the fashions of public taste, had been main factors in the making and the shaping of the plays, implied a reading of Shakespeare's character, and one which had the controversial advantage of being much more in keeping with the extant biographical data than the Shakespeare of the idealists, even if it left the gulf between this pragmatist and the creator of *Hamlet* and *Lear* only the more difficult to bridge. And this has reacted very perceptibly upon the first controversy, gradually shifting the dispute from the question whether Shakespeare's personality can be discerned at all, to the questions whether, so far as it is discernible, it is of the compliant "practical" or of the autocratic self-inspired type; whether he was a man in and of his age, flattering its tastes, sharing its prejudices, reflecting its interests, or the man of "all time", never comprehended till long after his own day, who used the life of his age as mere material for his alchemic art.



The best Shakespeare criticism of our time is doubtless agreed that he was in some sense both ; and its most important achievement has been to make it rather easier to explain how. But before speaking of the critics who, by different methods and with different instruments, have penetrated farthest in our time into the genius of the poet, we will notice, in the first place, the scholar who has led, and still leads, the critics who deny the possibility of finding any clue to Shakespeare's personality in his work ; and then the two contemporaries who, almost at the same moment as he, exultantly proclaimed that the supposed inscrutable mask was a speaking and transparent face.

Lee

§ 2. Sir Sidney Lee's *Life of William Shakespeare*, first published in 1898, exemplified the patient, exact, and somewhat colourless historic research then coming into vogue. Shakespeare study as it then was, had room, and need, for this type of scholarship. Lee himself, after adverting in the preface, with perhaps unnecessary selfconsciousness, to the abundance of "æsthetic studies of Shakespeare" already existing, "to increase the number of which" would be "a work of supererogation", more than justified his preference of the historic method by throwing new light at several points on the origin and subject-matter of plays or poems. There were chiefly three cases. Lee was the first to explain the tissue of allusions (to the war in France, and the meeting of Henry of Navarre with the French princess, the Russian embassy to Elizabeth, and other sensations of the day) in *Love's Labour's Lost*. He also worked out the connection between the *Merchant of Venice* and the contemporary trial of Lopez, the queen's Jewish physician.

Finally, important new light was thrown upon the Sonnets, as will be described below (III, iii), by Lee's comparative study of the European sonnet-movement of the century.

Later editions of the *Life*, especially that, greatly enlarged and partially rewritten, of 1915, incorporated also the very considerable accretions of biographic fact made in the interval, and described elsewhere. They include not a little due to Lee himself.

Almost simultaneously with Lee's *Life* two Shakespereans of a more expansive type testified to the eternal fascination of those daring adventures which his austere reticence had declined: Mr. Frank Harris, in the *Saturday Review* articles (1899), later collected in his book *Shakespeare the Man*, and Dr. Georg Brandes in his *William Shakespeare* (1898).

Harris

§ 3. Mr. Harris, a clever journalist, without scholarly training or instincts, but with great ingenuity, some real insight, and an arresting



vehemence of style, leapt lightly over all the obstacles which baffle other inquirers. He saw "Shakespeare the Man" unmistakably plain and clear, and painted his image in crude colours. For Shakespeare was not the impersonal dramatist, invisible behind the "thousand minds" he created, but a single well-defined personality, which can be readily seized. Not only "the main features of his character" can be established beyond doubt, but "the chief incidents of his life". His portrait reappears again and again from the beginning of his career to the end. Not that it remains constant. On the contrary it changes as he changes and grows with his growth. He is Romeo, then Hamlet, then Macbeth, the duke in *Measure for Measure*, Postumus, Prospero. The model of all these characters, at first sight so diverse, is Mr. Harris's "Shakespeare"—"a gentle, bookish, irresolute" being, who evades every call to energetic action, and is moreover morbidly erotic and the helpless slave of a "dark lady", from whose embraces he finally retires, a broken man, to Stratford. No doubt this process of self-portrayal was not carried consistently through, even in the same character; hence glaring dissonances, as when Macbeth, a murderer, utters lyrics "utterly unexpected and out of place", like those about murdered sleep, or when Duke Vincentio, exhorting Claudio in prison, appears callous to his fate because he is just "a poet-philosopher talking to lighten his own heart". In all this it is clear that Mr. Harris has failed through complete lack of critical method. His "Man Shakespeare" is a fantastic "imitation of humanity", composed of traits arbitrarily chosen from characters which, like Prospero and Postumus, or Romeo and Jaques, have nothing in common. And even were this "Man" as transparently present in the dramas as Mr. Harris declares, his assumption that this Shakesperean creation represents Shakespeare would not be the less psychologically naive. Of all great dramatists Shakespeare is the one of whom we can least securely argue self-portraiture, so dazzling is his genius for creating human figures more real than life and yet utterly unlike himself. More surely than by studying the kind of men he drew, the character of such an artist can be inferred from the character of his art. And if anything is transparently clear about Shakespeare's art it is that it is the product of a mind conspicuously sane and sound.

§ 4. Dr. Georg Brandes approached the Shakesperean problem with other and far higher claims to attention. He had held for thirty years a commanding position among European critics. He had written a penetrating sketch of the life of the most illustrious living member of his race, Lord Beaconsfield, and recounted with

Brandes



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equal brilliance and perversity the English literary history of what was for him pre-eminently the age of Byron. Yet English culture was not naturally congenial to him; nor was he a specialist in Elizabethan lore. But at least there could be no question of provincial insularity in literary or in ethical judgment. Brandes saw Shakespeare with the eyes of a man of cosmopolitan culture, who had not only surveyed as a critical onlooker, but mingled and contended with, the master-currents of intellectual life in the century about to close. This European note is significantly sounded in the opening lines of his *William Shakespeare* (1898), where the Englishman appears as the third of the great trio of the giants of the Renaissance age, with Michelangelo who died when he was born and Cervantes who died within a few days of his death, the one his peer in pathos, the other in humour. Brandes's predecessor and master, Taine, had been doubly entangled in a doctrinaire theory of the English race and in a pseudo-scientific theory of literature; Shakespeare, as he saw him, was the typical product of an England that still hung aloof in savage isolation from the refinement of humanized Europe. Brandes sees in him the supreme example of that universal humanity of the European Renaissance which entered creatively into every sphere of life. More than that: the emancipating power of Shakespeare's humanity has loosened the grip of antipathies which made brilliant pamphlets of some of Brandes's own earlier books. He can appreciate and felicitously characterize Shakespeare's gracious portraits of priests and monks, of Friar Lawrence or Pandolph; and far from resenting like most modern interpreters Henry V's dismissal of that consummate example of Renaissance exuberance, Falstaff, he justifies it as the inevitable preliminary to the new régime of self-reform and self-control. Such self-control Shakespeare himself now felt to be the determining factor of human life. "The reproof is spoken out of Shakespeare's very soul." In Henry no less than in Falstaff runs the sap of Shakespeare's own exuberant vitality, his genial acceptance of life in its full range.

Brandes's foible is to discover too constantly not merely the sap of Shakespeare's vitality but the accent of his voice, the echo of his personal joys and sorrows. The literature described in the *Main Currents* was everywhere quick with the living experience of the men and women who made it, and why should it be otherwise with Shakespeare? Parallels between Shakespeare's life and the situations of the plays had been collected by commentators who often had but mechanical notions of literature. To Brandes such correspondences were the hall-mark of all vital art, and he gathered them up



freely and uncritically into the rich loosely-organized texture of his book. Memories of Italian travel furnished those immortal pictures of Verona and Venice; grief for his own lost boy rings out in Constance's passion over Arthur; the zest of the recent or impending purchase of New Place betrays itself in the general preoccupation, in *The Merchant*, with ways of winning or spending or borrowing or conveying wealth. He bore Chapman a grudge, as his rival, according to a speculative hypothesis, in the love of an equally hypothetical "dark lady"; hence the "bitter mood", itself no less hypothetical, shown in scathing pictures (in *Troilus and Cressida*) of the Homeric heroes whom the "rival" had made accessible to the English world. In such things Brandes follows too readily the more matter-of-fact type of English criticism. His strength lies in a richness and range of artistic perception, in which few Shakesperean critics of any period have equalled him. He can make us, like Lamb, more intensely aware of grandeur, of pathos, of the hugeness of one tragic figure, the enigmatic poignancy of another, of the "rightness amid the wrongness" of a third. Above all, he is aware, and keeps us from forgetting, that Shakespeare is a poet, that his persons are poets, and that no imaginative splendour in their speech is to be ascribed to his, or their, momentary oblivion of the consistency of their part. Hotspur protests his hatred of music and ballads, and some critics have accordingly grudged him the splendid outbursts of poetry which not seldom visit him:

"By heaven, methinks, it were an easy leap  
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon."

To Brandes, too, he is fundamentally "a man of sober intelligence who keeps to the common earth, and believes only what his senses aver". "But there is nevertheless", he goes on, "a spring in him which need only to be touched to send him soaring." Brandes fails often in the nicer matters of Shakesperean scholarship, and builds too lightly on the foundations laid by men whose critical qualifications did not approach his own. But he has something of the temperament of genius, and sometimes feels his way better by instinctive fellowship than others by trained skill. His book stands in a place of its own, as the richest in wit and temperament, in luminous aperçus and dangerous assumptions, in felicitous suggestion and fascinating error, of all the Shakesperean monographs of this period.

§ 5. The decade following the dramatic emergence, from opposite

Bradley



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poles of the critical horizon, of the books of Lee, and of Harris and Brandes, saw the inception, or more energetic prosecution, of two lines of research destined deeply to affect our conceptions of Shakespeare's art and indirectly of his character. Prof. A. H. Thorndike's *Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare* (1901) was the most brilliant and decisive example of a series of studies, largely American, which showed the close relation between changes in the character of Shakespeare's plays and contemporary fashions of drama; in this case making probable that *The Tempest* and other "Romances" of his later years owed much to the example of those younger masters of "Romance". And in 1904, C. Brodmeier published the essay on the Elizabethan stage which for the next decade, as we saw, drew so much vigorous research in that direction. In the same year appeared A. C. Bradley's *Shakesperean Tragedy*—an essay in purely critical interpretation, where both these new currents were serenely ignored; two years later (1906), the *Shakespeare* of Leo Tolstoy, in which these and all other fashions, old and new, of Shakesperean inquiry were scornfully repudiated in the name of the elemental art of the peasant.

It is true that Dr. Bradley disclaimed any attempt to deal with the recognized preoccupations of Shakesperean scholarship—with his "life and character, the development of his genius and art". *Shakesperean Tragedy* was nevertheless an indirect contribution of the first importance to the study, at least, of his genius and his art, and implicitly of his "character" also. The current doctrine, rapidly hardening into dogma, that Shakespeare, like lesser men, can be interpreted only through the historic conditions in which he wrote, went by the board. Bradley's instrument of interpretation was the intuitive insight of a trained, alert, and kindled imagination. But if he thus openly attached himself to the æsthetic tradition of Coleridge and Hazlitt, he used this instrument of interpretation with a methodical precision which reflected the more scientific temper of the Elizabethan scholarship of his own time. No critic of comparable æsthetic power had interpreted Shakespeare on the basis of so rigorous a scrutiny into the dramatic data of the text, or had discovered so many unsuspected problems of plot and character thereby. The same fruitful combination of scientific thoroughness in marshalling evidence and imaginative insight in interpreting it, distinguish, as we shall see later, his treatment of the problem of Shakespeare's personality.

In *Shakesperean Tragedy* he is concerned with two tasks: an investigation into the nature of Tragedy, as Shakespeare under-



stood and practised it, and a reinterpretation of the four supreme tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, to which one of *Antony and Cleopatra*, beyond doubt the greatest of the tragedies after these, was added in the "Oxford Lectures" (1909).

Our time is impatient of æsthetic theory. Yet the character and laws of a spiritual organism of so much moment for the world as the Tragedy of Shakespeare cannot be indifferent. Hegel, the most searching and original exponent of tragic theory since Aristotle, laid down a conception of tragedy which, if one-sided, was nobly one-sided, and cleared away much vulgar misconception. His view of tragic conflict as originally one in which both antagonists have a certain justification, sharply traversed the "crime and punishment" theory of tragedy; and his estimation of character not by its conformity to moral rules, but by its weight and strength of substance, its power of being what it is—valuably supplemented the ethical criteria to which Aristotle himself had given currency. "The strength of great characters lies in this that they do not choose but fundamentally *are* what they achieve and will." It became henceforth easier to see the conflict of principles in the struggle between Richard and Bolingbroke, between Shylock and Antonio, to recognize the colossal power as well as the malignity of Iago. That downright villany has a far larger scope in modern than in ancient tragedy he of course recognizes. "Richard and Edmund and Goneril deserve all they get." But his optimism allows him to be too easily satisfied with their overthrow, too easily reconciled to the ruin of a Hamlet or a Juliet, because their nature permits no other end. The thought is profound and true. But it leaves some other tragic catastrophes untouched, such as the death of Cordelia. If the close even of *King Lear* and of *Othello* leaves us "reconciled", we have first to reckon with and get the better of depths of anomaly and unreason imperfectly recognized in Hegel's view of the world, and thence in his view of tragedy.

It is at this point that Mr. Bradley, building largely on Hegel's foundation, parts company with him. The world represented in Shakesperean tragedy is not, in his eyes, so completely rational, or so finally satisfying to our idealism. The tragic action is grounded in the energies and conflict of human wills, but the final ruin is not always brought about without some intrusive influence not to be so explained—the madness of Lear, the supernatural solicitings of the Ghost or the Witches, or the mere "accident", the undesigned caprice of circumstances, which prevents Friar Lawrence's messenger from reaching Romeo, and Edmund's from reaching Lear's prison,



in time; or which causes Hamlet's ship to encounter pirates on the way to England, and thus saves him for the genuine tragic doom which he suffers and inflicts. Such things are not only facts, but tragic facts, in life, and may thus fitly have a limited place in tragedy, notwithstanding its primary concern with the ruin wrought by and in human character. But Mr. Bradley, while thus qualifying the intellectualism which saw nothing but deliberate purpose in Shakesperean tragedy, is still, in his treatment of Shakespeare the artist, an intellectualist of the purest water himself. He does not even entertain the idea that this admission of "accident" in tragedy may have been "accidental" in Shakespeare, a short cut to the conclusion, not an ingredient of plot, consciously recognized and deliberately introduced. Accident is a tragic fact. "Shakespeare accordingly admits it", though he "uses it very sparingly".

The same qualified withdrawal from Hegelian idealism appears in Bradley's searching analysis of the metaphysical implications of Shakesperean tragedy. The question lies, for most people, outside the domain of tragic art. That it does not do so for him, signifies only that the impassioned consciousness that attends supreme tragedy is intimately allied both to philosophy and to religion. But the world represented in Shakesperean tragedy does not, in his view, suggest any one metaphysical solution. It suggests ideas both of ruthless fate and of moral order, yet neither idea can be completely justified. The order of things which causes crime invariably to end with ruin, must so far be good; yet with the criminal it ruins the innocent, and moreover it has itself produced Iago and Edmund as well as Cordelia and Desdemona. And the ruin of tragedy does not always run on these lines at all. Antony, with all his faults, is more precious than Octavius, Macbeth than Malcolm, Hamlet than Fortinbras. If good is somehow won, it is at the cost of hideous waste. "We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact, or the no less inexplicable appearance, of a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste. And this fact or appearance is tragedy." In other words, and this is the most original part of Mr. Bradley's theory, it is not merely the story and fate of Hamlet or Othello which is tragic, but the very nature of the universe whose controlling and contending forces their story reflects.

*Shakesperean Tragedy*, as we have said, contributes incidentally, in spite of its author's disclaimer, to the study of Shakespeare's "character". It makes clear, for instance, from such examples of



disparity between the acting and the poetic qualities of a play as we have in *King Lear*, that his artistry cannot be exhaustively explained by compliance with the taste or wishes of the Company or even of the public. Even when he accepted their lead, he followed it in a way of his own, a way that satisfied his artistry while supplying what they demanded from art. "We see that he has done something that would please his audience, and we dismiss it as accounted for, forgetting that perhaps it also pleased him, and that we have to account for that." Such hints rather adumbrate than expound the personality of Shakespeare as Bradley sees it. In a later essay, his Academy lecture, "Shakespeare the Man", he addressed himself with singular skill and caution to the task of mediating between the flamboyant confidence of the Brandes and Harris type of interpreter, and the negations of the school of Lee.

§ 6. Against the complete sceptics like Lee, to whose Academy lecture of the year before his own is a reply, he urges that, without any process of argument, we all form instinctively a vague impression of the author of the plays and poems; an impression, moreover, which for all intelligent readers is substantially the same. That this impression, though vague, has definite quality, is shown by the sharp outline it presents towards some other types of character. If asked whether we think Shakespeare was like Wordsworth, or Shelley, or Milton, the most sceptical of us is prompt with his answer. Less so, if asked whether we think he resembled Fielding or Scott. This impression is not fully conveyed by the general testimony of his contemporaries to his "gentleness" and "honesty", and "free and open nature"; but it is quite in keeping with it. That he was sociable and cheerful, "very good company", and even more disposed by temperament to comedy than to tragedy, as contemporary opinion declares, is in keeping with it too. His tragedies do not suggest the morose temper of a pessimist; his most terrible pictures of the power of evil give us the ineffable vision of goodness in Cordelia, in Desdemona; and it is rightly seen that, though they perish miserably, the world which produced them cannot be hopeless; the vital thing is not that they were happy or unhappy, but that they existed at all. And it is significant that this "free and open nature" is the constant mark of his tragic heroes, as if Shakespeare had been most impressed by the kind of calamity which befalls such natures as his own. Othello is "of a free and open nature" (says Iago, almost in Jonson's words), Hamlet is "most generous and free from all contrivings", Lear, Timon, Coriolanus, are ruined by different varieties of the nobly "open" temper.

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Lecture



"The affections, passions, and sufferings of free and open natures are Shakespeare's favourite tragic subject." That these sufferings had been his own we cannot conclude; but his constant recurrence to them points to a preoccupation more deeply grounded than the repetition of a telling trick.

Whether any "dark" experience underlay the "gloomy" tragedies depends much, for Dr. Bradley as for others, on our reading of the Sonnets. And in this Lecture he makes an important contribution to the view that the apparent "story" of the Sonnets is substantially true. That they contain "conventional" motives, current everywhere in the European sonneteering movement (as proved by Sir Sidney Lee), does not show that the story is a fabrication of fancy. And there is one decisive argument for holding it to be nothing of the kind. The "æsthetic" argument, namely. "No capable poet, much less a Shakespeare, intending to produce a merely 'dramatic' series of poems, would dream of inventing a story like that of these Sonnets. . . . The story is very odd and unattractive. Such capacities as it has are but slightly developed. It is left obscure, and some of the poems are unintelligible to us because they contain allusions of which we can make nothing." Now all this, Dr. Bradley justly urges, "is perfectly natural if the story is substantially a real story of Shakespeare himself and of certain other persons; . . . and if they were written *for* one or more of these persons; written, that is, for people who knew the details and incidents of which we are ignorant".

Can anything be said definitely of the ways of Shakespeare's mind? of his mental proclivities? of his tastes? One or two features of the enigmatic countenance can hardly be misread. We cannot imagine him an "enthusiast for an idea", a fanatic or a friend to fanatics, of whatever creed or breed. "One may even suggest that on this side he was limited. In any age he would have been safe against one-sided ideas; but perhaps in no age would he have been the man to insist . . . on those one-sided ideas which the moment may need, or even to give his whole heart to men who join a forlorn hope or are martyred for a faith."

At the other end of the scale of interest is a trait on which this critic has no doubt whatever: Shakespeare disliked dogs! He not only "did not care for dogs, as Homer did, he even disliked them, as Goethe did". The plays swarm with the base and vicious traits of the dog, and there is absolutely nothing to set against them. "And then we call him universal!" Yet one cannot but ask whether, in this small matter, Shakespeare may not have been, not the crank with



a dislike for dogs, but just the dramatist who took over the general opinions of the community into his art, and had no disposition, here or elsewhere, to "lead forlorn hopes" or stand up for the unjustly maligned.

§ 7. *Shakesperean Tragedy* gave a new impulse to the literary and æsthetic way of approaching Shakespeare. Its appearance synchronized, as we saw, with the beginning of the more intensive study of Elizabethan stage conditions; but Bradley's book created a countercurrent of, for the time, comparable force. It was under these conditions that Professor (later Sir) W. A. Raleigh undertook, at the invitation of Messrs. Macmillan, to write the long missing *Shakespeare* for the "English Men of Letters", a task previously taken up and abandoned in succession (as he confided to the present writer) by two illustrious Victorians, George Eliot and John Morley. Raleigh's monograph (1907) attempted a synthesis of the two types of scholarship, too often estranged. Literature and history reinforced one another in its pages. Not unworthy, in its impetuous and dashing brilliance, to follow Bradley's weightier and deeper masterpiece, it disclosed also a sustained attempt, foreign to his purpose, to interpret Shakespeare in terms of Elizabethan England.

Raleigh was acutely conscious of the fallacies, even the fatuities, into which want of the historic spirit had betrayed critics so great as Coleridge. The Porter's speech in *Macbeth*, for example, is "low"; it was, therefore, Coleridge concluded, "written for the mob by some other hand, perhaps with Shakespeare's consent". But one sentence (that beginning "I'll devil-porter it no further") was worthy of Shakespeare, "and so Shakespeare must be at hand to write it". And critics whose admiration was in general very much on this side of idolatry have none the less, as we saw, found their Shakespeare written large to the life, in this or that of his personages, in *Hamlet*, nay in *Henry V*; and have heard his opinions uttered loud and clear in *Ulysses's* eulogy of order or *Coriolanus's* derision of the greasy mob. But of the opposite conclusion, that "the man Shakespeare is not to be found in the plays", he will hear nothing. It expresses the natural reaction of a sober and positive-minded criticism against the excesses of misapplied imagination; but it is not a conclusion which any artist will entertain. The true answer alike to the theory that Shakespeare is *Hamlet* or any other of his creations, and to the opposite theory that he lurks completely invisible behind them, answerable for nothing that they do or say, is that he is visible in all, and answerable for them all. "No



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dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself to the children of his art, scattering among them a largess of his own qualities, giving it may be to one his wit, to another his philosophic doubt, to another his love of action, to another his simplicity and constancy that he finds deep in his own nature. There is no thrill of feeling communicated from the printed page but has first been alive in the mind of the author; there was nothing alive in his mind that was not intensely and sincerely felt. Plays like those of Shakespeare cannot be written in cold blood; they call forth the man's whole energies, and take toll of the last farthing of his wealth of sympathy and experience." This doctrine of artistic experience suffers somewhat, perhaps, from defective precision in the terms; the step from emotion imagined and described to emotion experienced is too lightly taken. But it is clear that while the cold, impassive, impersonal creator is dismissed, and justly dismissed, the image of the poet remains as enigmatic and inscrutable as ever. He sympathizes with all his persons instead of regarding them with impartial detachment; but the lineaments of his mind are as effectually obscured by recognizing them everywhere as by recognizing them nowhere; the personality diffused impartially among its creations necessarily loses distinctness of outline.

Yet it remains that Shakespeare has "revealed his whole mind to us" (p. 17), and we are free to interpret the revelation. The veil is lifted, the face confronts our gaze, and what it expresses is true. And so Raleigh has no difficulty in arriving at a Shakespeare of his own. To be sure, it is no simple, single-souled man whom he discovers in the "myriad-minded" creator. "His character was not all of a piece, neat and harmonious and symmetrical." He knew inner division and conflict; the struggles which are the theme of his greatest plays had their counterpart in his own breast. "The central drama of his mind is the tragedy of the life of the imagination"—the conflict between the demands of the brooding, dreaming faculty, with which he was so richly endowed, and the claims of action, of practice—the conflict, in short, once more, of Hamlet. His pictures alike of the men of imaginative power, Richard II, Hamlet, Macbeth, and of the men of practical power, Hotspur, Faulconbridge, Othello, are among the most closely studied and intimately realized of all. And "he holds the balance even".

Conflict, never resolved either way, where the poet "holds the balance even" but reaches no inner decision, seems thus to be the



result of translating the drama which Shakespeare created into a drama which he experienced. Such a phenomenon evidently falls in well with the conception of a nature divided against itself by inexhaustible sympathy with opposite sides. And we are warned not to suppose that the balance in such conflicts, with Shakespeare, ever tilted, as with most men, into definite and pronounced opinion. In particular, into opinions on "morality". "There is no moral lesson to be read, except accidentally, in any of Shakespeare's tragedies." "Shakespeare's many allusions to philosophy and reason (such as that which declares that no philosopher ever bore the toothache patiently) show how little he trusted them. . . . It is therefore vain to seek in the plays for a philosophy or doctrine which may be extracted or set forth in brief." Yet this apparent consequence of the universal-sympathy theory is severely strained, beyond doubt, by much in the plays. Not only are moral ideas, far reaching, profound, and sublime, continually put forth in the great tragedies, but we do not easily escape the belief that Shakespeare judged the issue of his tragic conflicts in ways for which universal sympathy is a very inadequate expression. Raleigh himself cannot, at moments, resist the force of this phenomenon. *Measure for Measure* is, he says (p. 169), of all the plays the one "that comes nearest to the direct treatment of a moral problem". What, he asks, did Shakespeare think of it? But his answer is more than tinged with the negation of morality which his general position appears to involve. "Shakespeare condemns no one, high or low." And he resents the definiteness of moral judgment apparent in most criticisms of the play; where "we are presented with a picture of Vienna as a black pit of seething wickedness; and against this background there rises the dazzling, white, and saintly figure of Isabella. The picture makes a good enough Christmas Card, but it is not Shakespeare." And he goes on, not merely to fill in this crude picture with the mediating nuances, but to soften into a slightly modulated uniformity of tone those glaring dissonances. "This world of Vienna, as Shakespeare paints it, is not a black world; it is a weak world, full of little vanities and stupidities, regardful of custom, fond of pleasure, idle, and abundantly human." And we are asked to regard this "sympathetic" judgment of his as an example of the more catholic view of conduct induced by experience of life, and to compare the sharp judgment upon the Pompeys and Angelos of the play with the naïve sharpness of the moral judgments of children. The bias of the action seems to make for Isabella and against Angelo; and yet "she is an ascetic by nature", and



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"Shakespeare has left us in no doubt concerning his own views on asceticism".

He had, then, "views on asceticism" and views plain beyond doubt. And his "sympathy" with Isabella was thus far incomplete. But precisely in this play, universal sympathy, of whatever order, seems very imperfectly to convey our impression of Shakespeare's mind. True, he treats Angelo, as Raleigh says, "very considerately, even mildly"; true, he marries off the saintly sister, with scant regard to her ascetic ideals. But we have to distinguish the concluding phases of the play, where Shakespeare, as Johnson surmises, was anxious to finish, and made, as Bradley says, "a scandalous business" of it, from the crucial scenes in which alone Shakespeare's mind is at white heat. Be it true, as Raleigh urges, that "there is no single character through whose eyes we can see the questions at issue as Shakespeare saw them". That does not make it less clear what Shakespeare thought when Isabel denounced the man who proposed to prostitute her in order to buy off his own law, or what he thought when she refused her brother's appeal to be saved at that price. Shakespeare was doubtless far from sharing Isabel's view of sex-morality, and might have allowed another woman to give another answer both to Claudio and to Angelo. But the outrage proposed by Angelo is no mere sexual offence; it is the betrayal of a great trust, the insolent use of a giant's power "like a giant", and we "enervate" Shakespeare, as Prof. Elton justly says (*Modern Essays*, 1909), if we imagine him "holding the balance" sympathetically between the two. "Being a complete man, he was also, at the right moment, as stern as Dante as well as more widely sympathetic, so that he can strike the chord of outraged shame and justified wrath as no man has ever struck it."

We must then abandon the dogma of the all-sympathetic Shakespeare if we wish to do justice at all points to the impression made by the Shakesperean drama.<sup>1</sup> Yet of its relative validity as against much perverse speculation there is no doubt, and it is a chief distinction of Raleigh's book to have applied it with fresh insight and scholarship to the elucidation of the ways of his mind and art. He shows us a Shakespeare who was a supreme observer, artist, and poet, but in experience, habits, and outlook a pretty normal Elizabethan man, the stuff of whose plays is that same common Elizabethan humanity and that common Elizabethan experience, transmuted but not effaced or attenuated by his art.

<sup>1</sup> How well defined are the limits of Shakespeare's sympathy in sexual matters in particular, is shown in the present writer's *Shakespeare's Treatment of Love and Marriage* (1920).



## CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

He shows how Falstaff's syntax may be illustrated from Wilson's *Art of Rhetorik*, the robbery at Gadshill from the extant lore of highway roguery, and the like. Shakespeare's consummate art itself was no exotic or antiquarian technique imposed upon native materials; the books that yield him his stories often suggest his way of handling them. His art is penetrated with traditional elements; the transforming alchemy is there, beyond question or mistake, but it is hard to lay one's finger on the precise point at which what he found gives place to what he gave. Raleigh, with his double-edged critical weapon of Elizabethan scholarship and poetic insight, does more adequate justice than any predecessor to this root-character of Shakespeare's art. The dramatist complied with the call of his public; yes, but with his own genius too. "They asked for blood and melodrama and he gave them *Hamlet*; they asked for Jew-baiting and he gave them *The Merchant of Venice*."

§ 8. A contemporary American critic of the drama, Prof. Brander Matthews, of Columbia University, has declared that English criticism of Shakespeare is preoccupied with the poet, French with the psychologist, American with the playwright. This divergence received a salient illustration when, in the same year as Raleigh's monograph (1907), the Harvard Professor G. P. Baker issued his *The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist*. But the date marks (as far as a date can) the beginning in general of a more intensive study of Shakespeare's technique in the light of the better understanding now being rapidly gained of the Elizabethan playhouse. Two years before, the bearing of Elizabethan stage-structure upon Elizabethan play-making had been luminously explained by G. F. Reynolds in *Some Principles of Elizabethan Stagecraft* (1905.) For Raleigh, and still more for Bradley, Shakespeare was primarily a poet writing drama. For Baker he was not only writing drama; he was making plays for a particular theatre, a particular Company, a particular public; and the structure, policy, or taste of all these decisively determined the kind of play he made. This specific and concrete treatment of Shakespeare's stagecraft distinguishes Baker's work from older books like R. G. Moulton's classical *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (1886), where the stage is almost an abstraction. He analyses, for instance, the taste of "the public of 1590", for which the "prentice" Shakespeare had to cater. It wanted "story", and the want was more satisfactorily met on the curtainless Elizabethan stage, where "scene melted into scene", than on ours, where long pauses break up the continuity of action. That is a sufficient justification for the modern attempts made by

Influence of  
Stage-study



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Mr. W. Poel and the Elizabethan stage society from the early years of the century onward, to restore Shakespeare to a stage like his own. But Mr. Baker goes further and regards the Elizabethan stage as absolutely better suited for the end of play-making, which is to bring the play home to the feeling and imagination of the audience.

"The conditions of the Shakesperian stage were intimate to an extent we can scarcely realize, and permitted a detail not always possible in our larger theatres. Above all, everything in the performance tended to make the play the thing: no lavish scenery drew off the attention, properties were usually employed only to the extent that the play demanded; there were no 'stars', and both actor and hearer must give themselves up to the author, the one to interpret, the other to understand, if the play was to produce its full effect. Is it not evident that for the dramatist conditions were far better than to-day, indeed well-nigh perfect?"

Stagecraft, so understood, aimed at the production of the utmost amount of emotional effect. Mr. Baker's book is an attempt to find "both the permanent principles and the ephemeral experimentalism" that went to this result in Shakespeare. He traces, in particular, his slow mastery of the art of unifying the story elements of a play—a virtue much sooner reached in comedy, as in *Comedy of Errors*, than in history, as in *Henry IV*; and his growingly skilful use of suspense.

It will suffice to mention the analogous essay of Professor Brander Matthews, "Shakespeare as a Playwright" (1913). Subsequent critics devoted themselves, with remarkable results, to working out the bearing of the new method, both upon the interpretation of Shakespeare's "personality", and in particular, as will be seen in a later section, on the interpretation of his characters. Three years after Matthews' volume, his colleague, Professor Brewster, surveyed, from the standpoint of the modern historical method, the whole history of the attempts to "reconstruct the personality" of Shakespeare up to that date (1916) in a critical and somewhat sceptical sense.

In England the effect of the more intensive stage-study was distinctly seen in Mr. Darrell Figgis's *Shakespeare: A Study* (1911), where "the principles of Elizabethan stagecraft" were lucidly expounded. In particular, Mr. Figgis showed that editors and stage-managers, interpreting Shakespeare as if he had written for a modern stage and for a modern audience, had often, as in the first garden scene of *Romeo and Juliet* (i. 4), radically departed



from Shakespeare's intention in the conduct of the action. A few years later Sir A. Quiller-Couch was delivering, from the chair of English literature at Cambridge, breezy lectures on Shakespeare's craftsmanship as a playwright, in which the literary intuitions of an experienced man of letters were fertilized and controlled, often to felicitous effect, by the new study of stage conditions. They were collected in his later volume, *Shakespeare's Workmanship*, and many of his results will doubtless be reproduced and supplemented—or revised—in *The New Shakespeare*, now in progress, of which he is co-editor.

Not only in England and America, but in Germany, once the home of philosophic idealists, the historical and "realist" school became, in the second decade of the century, everywhere dominant.<sup>1</sup> The classical German biography of the preceding period, the *Shakespeare* of Alois Brandl—a book which in many-sided appreciation of the artist and the man stands in the front rank of all Shakespeare biographies—fully recognizes, as rewritten in 1922, that the theatre was always the controlling influence in his art. But in 1921 a voice peremptorily repudiating the very axioms of the historical school of Shakespereans was heard from Italy.

§ 9. Benedetto Croce, long since recognized as one of the most original constructive thinkers of our time, and more recently as a literary critic of remarkable penetration and range, approached Shakespeare with a command of various disciplines and various experience rare in his interpreters. His own philosophy is a masterful survey of the creative energies of "spirit" variously unfolded in our civilization. The *Æsthetics*, its starting-point, lays down his theory of poetry, in his view the most primitive and instinctive kind of spiritual creation. But this book is equally the starting-point of his literary criticism. Nowhere else to-day has so elaborate an apparatus of philosophic thinking been applied to the analysis and valuation of poetry. But the instrument is finely tempered as well as powerfully wrought, and if, as we think, it has nevertheless injured on the whole his criticism of Shakespeare, this is not because it fetters or distorts his acute natural sensibility to what is great in poetry. Its effect is rather seen in his unqualified refusal, in accordance with the rigorous severance instituted in the *Æsthetics* between "practice" and "poetry", to take account of the "practical" Shakespeare—the man of whom the external data provide us with fragmentary and meagre but indispensable glimpses. "A biography of Shakespeare is impossible."

<sup>1</sup> Professor Schücking's *Charakter-Probleme*, a striking evidence of this, is noticed below (III, II).



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That any events or persons, political or social movements, theatrical fashion or popular taste, affected the course or the character of the dramas, he holds to be at best idle hypothesis of which no use can be made. What then remains? Just the poetic creation itself, and whatever conclusions it may yield about the poet. And these prove to be not inconsiderable. We must not, indeed, think of tracing the evolution of the poet in his poetry, any more than of the man in his recorded acts. Nor must we ascribe to him principles, opinions, "ideals", of any kind, for these things belong to the intellectual, not to the poetic life. The poetic life is, on the other hand, impossible without feeling (*sentimento*), the necessary accompaniment, he lays down in the *Æsthetics* (chap. x), of all poetic activity. Croce thus, on strictly psychological grounds, dismisses the theory, sometimes advanced by critics appalled, like Schiller, at the fate of Cordelia or Desdemona, that Shakespeare's art was passionless as well as impersonal. He had no "ideals" and no politics; but he did not stand coldly and sublimely aloof from the humanity he portrayed. On the contrary, he entered into all sides and aspects of life with an eager zest, and his impersonal air arises not from detachment but from his endowing all the feelings he represents with equal vigour, "creating a sort of equilibrium by reciprocal tension". It must be owned that the Shakespeare of intense universal sympathies who is thus allowed to emerge, comes at times dangerously near the "idealist" who has been expressly banished. "An infinite hatred for deceitful wickedness inspired *King Lear*", while Cordelia persuades us that "the inspiration of love—of boundless love—is here even greater than the inspiration of hate". And this tragedy is "penetrated throughout with this unexpressed, anguished questioning, full of the sense of the misery of life". Again, the note of reconciliation, of final harmony achieved between antagonists or in a distracted soul, is never heard in Shakespeare—not even, we are to suppose, in *The Tempest* or in *Cymbeline*; whereas, what we hear in every part of his work is the note of Justice. "For he feels the struggle at the heart of reality, not as an accident or caprice, but as necessity." He is thus for ever debarred both from the cheerful optimism and from the despair of one who sees that struggle of good and ill definitely decided by the victory of either. His pervading sense of justice recognizes that good and evil are everywhere mingled, and his prevailing temper is that of a lofty indulgence. Some quite definite contours of personality thus become apparent. We are even allowed to ascribe to him a definite attitude towards religion,



provided we refrain strictly from associating him with any of its existing forms. Like Ariosto, he "shows himself clearly to be outside . . . every religious, nay, every transcendental and theological conception. . . . He knows no other than the vigorous, passionate life upon earth, divided between joy and sorrow, with, around and above it, the shadow of a mystery."

There was evidently room, within the lines of a Shakesperean personality thus conceived, for the whole vast range of Shakesperean poetry in its well-recognized divisions. Croce regroups the rich material in an original fashion of his own; and this is the most valuable part of his essay. The "Comedy of Love", "Romance", "Practical Action", "Good and Evil", the "Tragedy of Will", "Justice"—these rubrics indicate the source of Shakespeare's inspirations, and the groups of plays corresponding form an "ideal succession". That they also correspond generally to the chronological sequence is grudgingly admitted. But Croce fiercely rejects the notion that there may be a connection between the two sequences. This admission, however, seriously imperils that absolute demarcation between the Shakespeare of "practice" and the Shakespeare of "poetry" on which Croce's whole criticism is built; for the "practical" and the "poetic" Shakespeare after all concurred in writing (say) *The Comedy of Errors* at one date, *Hamlet* at another, *The Tempest* at a third, and so with the rest; and the outer evidence of the dates and the inner evidence of poetic quality and character have on the whole a degree of consistency far too considerable to be explained save by the assumption that the "man" was the "poet" and the poet was the man.

It is a further serious defect of Croce's criticism that he ignores almost entirely the evolution of Shakespeare's style and verse. For here the correspondence between the outer sequence founded upon known dates and the inner evolution measured by definite tests is evident and extraordinary; and had Croce taken note of this side of Shakesperean scholarship he would not, for instance, have insisted that *Coriolanus* ought to be grouped with the "Histories". It is doubtless truer to "history" than almost any of them; but both the organizing conception and the writing are of the time of the great tragedies. Moreover, the criticism of style is not merely a branch, least of all a negligible branch, of Shakespeare criticism; it provides the most powerful criterion we have for distinguishing the work of Shakespeare himself from the work of others. In this sense it may be called preliminary to all serious



Shakespeare study, and Mr. J. M. Robertson has justly signalized (in his volume *Croce as a Shakespeare Critic*) the insecure basis, to this extent, of Croce's work. But only those who share Mr. Robertson's iconoclastic views about the canon will think the "insecurity" of much account. When all is said, Croce's essay stands in the front rank of the contributions made during the last thirty years to the interpretation of Shakespeare.

## (ii) THE INTERPRETATION OF THE CHARACTERS

Idealism is  
Realism in  
Character  
Interpretation

§ 1. The interpretation of the characters of Shakespeare, like the interpretation of his own personality, has had a history, with fluctuations, revolutions, and reactions not determined solely by the genius or authority of particular interpreters, but reflecting general intellectual tendencies of the time. Hamlet is the salient instance; the changing phases of modern mentality from Goethe to the present generation may be traced in the long succession of portraits claiming to be the counterfeit presentment of Hamlet, which have issued from the critical and uncritical studios of Europe and America during that time. In a degree only less than Hamlet, as explained by successive generations of interpreters, Shylock, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Iago, Othello, and Falstaff have undergone variations analogous to those traceable in other fields of criticism or thought.

In Germany especially, where the interpretation of Shakespeare was pursued throughout the nineteenth century with the most ardour and the least restraint—where the interpretation of Hamlet, in particular, was a branch of applied philosophy—all the phases of her cultural evolution may be followed here. It has even been possible to write an account of "Shakespeare and German thought" which is at the same time a history, and a very brilliant one, of "German thought" itself.<sup>1</sup>

This correspondence is no less apparent in the thirty years with which we are here concerned. From Coleridge to Dowden the interpretation of Shakespeare's characters was dominated by critics who were disposed to sink the playwright in the dramatist, and even the dramatist in the poet. In varying degrees they inherited from Coleridge, their common master, the intellectualist bias which explains every kind of phenomenon more readily by reason and purpose than by blind impulse and accident, which therefore seeks, and commonly finds, meaning and significance

<sup>1</sup> Gundulf, *Shakespeare und der deutsche Gedanke* (1916).



everywhere, and in particular discovers in the speech, demeanour, and fortune of every Shakesperean character the working out of a single profound and coherent dramatic intention. Every phrase and act was significant, and had to be construed in terms of this inner law. To find such inner significance was the proper and normal aim of criticism, only to be given up on strong evidence, while explanations which ascribed to Shakespeare indolence or carelessness, or easygoing acceptance of other men's homespun to patch into his own new brocade, were on principle refused. In the same way, the great tragic and comic heroes were seen as, fundamentally, men of towering intellectual genius, whose aberrations base or animal passion or accident could never completely explain; Othello was not merely "jealous", nor Iago merely malignant, nor Shylock merely vindictive, nor Falstaff a coward. And through the whole Victorian period abnormal energy of intellect paralysing his power of will remained the favourite solution of the enigma of Hamlet.

That a pronounced reaction against this type of interpretation has, since 1900, become apparent, is not then to be explained merely by the deeper insight of the younger Shakespereans, or the cogency of the new facts they have adduced. The tide was running strongly against every form of the romantic or idealist temper which held Spirit to be the ultimate reality, and disdained both animal impulse and mechanical forces. Bergson, in effect, dethroned intelligence as the master faculty of man in favour of the instinctive intuition which he shares with the animal world. The prevailing psychology, from James and Wundt to M'Dougall, was preoccupied with those aspects of mentality which depend most closely upon the sense-stimuli, upon the half-unconscious and involuntary activities of instinct and habit, or upon determining or modifying social and physical conditions.

§ 2. In at least two ways, the interpretation of Shakesperean character after 1900 exhibited analogous or concurring tendencies. On the one hand, character is less ideally conceived. Criminals are less readily credited with lofty motives, or fools with a background of philosophy. The doctrine, orthodox since Morgann, that Falstaff, when he runs away at Gadshill, is a humorist affecting cowardice for a jest, is widely discarded in favour of the plain hearer's supposition that he ran away because he was afraid. And Hamlet, the most sensitive thermometer, as we have said, to these changes in the critical atmosphere, was, as early as 1893, peremptorily deprived of the prodigious intellectual activity, or the too sensitive conscience,

The  
new Realists:  
Schücking,  
Stoll



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one or other of which had till then commonly occasioned his inaction; and was declared (by Loening) to have suffered simply from sluggish blood. Even Bradley, in 1904, sharply qualified the traditional theory in the same sense by throwing the gravamen upon a "melancholy" induced in Hamlet by disgust at his mother's frailty.

The same disposition is betrayed, even more crucially, in the treatment of passages in which a character appears to rise "above himself". When Mercutio delivers his exquisite phantasia about Queen Mab, when Polonius, the "tedious old fool", utters noble wisdom in the lines which bid Laertes be true to himself,

"And it must follow as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man",

or when Laertes himself opens his counsel to Ophelia in a vein of ethical poetry of which nothing else that he says or does allows us to believe him capable, several lines of explanation are open to us. We may say, simply, that a dramatic character, like a man, is to be interpreted by the whole of his utterances; that Laertes or Mercutio had these veins of noble or fantastic poetry, even if nowhere else disclosed. But plainly, we are on more dangerous ground when dealing thus with an imagined character than with that of a living man. A man may be inconsistent or incoherent, he may have conflicting, even contradictory, moods, and yet remain indefeasibly himself. Whereas the seeming inconsistencies of an imagined character may merely betray the artist's fluctuating intention, or uncertain hand, or the capricious accesses and lulls of inspiration; and only subjective criteria are at present usually available to distinguish a character thus inconsistently imagined or drawn from one in which real inconsistencies are veraciously reproduced.

There is thus an opening, in such cases, for at least two types of solution, and the choice serves to discriminate two schools of character-interpretation. For the older idealists, of the Ulrici-Gervinus school, real inconsistency, of either kind, in Shakesperean character, did not exist; they found their way infallibly through all the variations of dramatic mood and utterance to the unifying "idea" discernible in them all. Modern psychology, by its disclosure of the phenomena of dual and multiple personality, has eased the path of those who find real inconsistency in any of Shakespeare's characters; their inconsistency need not detract from their psychological truth. This is the standpoint of Professor E. H. Wright, of Columbia, in his excellent essay "Reality and Incon-



sistency in Shakspeare's Characters" (*Shaksperian Studies*, by members of the Department of English in Columbia University, 1916). Mr. Wright recognizes with perfect clearness that our sense of a man's "reality" not merely does not depend upon our being able to reduce him to a formula, but is even heightened and quickened when we find our efforts to do so futile. And Shakespeare's persons impress us as "real" for the same reason. Again Hamlet is the crucial case:

"No critic has made one perfectly comprehensible man out of Hamlet. And yet there is no question of his reality—no one denies it—there is only a question whether we can grasp him as an entity, whether we can put him in a definition. We know Hamlet in much the same way as we know our friends, in spite of the fact that we cannot entirely explain him. Or rather it is the meaning of this essay that we know him in this way partly *because* we cannot explain him."

✓ On the other hand, the modern realist of the more mechanical type lays hands upon every appearance of inconsistency in the character as a sign of incongruity or incoherence in the art. "What is to be made of this heap of contradictions!" exclaims Professor E. E. Stoll after a summary of the demeanour of Othello.<sup>1</sup> Professor Lewin Schücking (*Die Charakterprobleme bei Shakespeare*, 1919) measures coherence by still more rigid standards. When Bottom, for instance, jests with Titania's elves (iii. 1):—"Good Master Mustardseed, . . . that same cowardly giant-like ox-beef hath devoured many a gentleman of your house", &c.—he is witty, whereas "his ass-head shows that he is meant to be a fool". No one before, I imagine, ever thought the resourceful Bottom incapable of this homely wit. But Bottom's tether is at best short; he cannot move far in any direction from his base. Schücking, however, flies later at a far more elusive quarry—of all Shakespeare's characters the one to whom his rather elementary conception of coherence is the hardest to apply—the mistress of caprice, Cleopatra herself, of whose "infinite variety" we are expressly told, for it is a part of the exquisite charm which fascinated all men from Cæsars and triumvirs downward. Such she already appears in Plutarch; but Schücking finds her, in Shakespeare, not merely "various" but divided against herself—a heartless coquette in the first half, a devoted lover, even a wife, in the second. "When she helps to arm him for battle (iv. 4), she might almost be Desdemona with Othello." We are here concerned only to describe a critical method, not to discuss its results; but it is obvious to note, first, that the drama

<sup>1</sup> Professor Stoll's views are most fully represented in his *Comparative Study of Hamlet* (Research Public. of University of Minnesota, 1919).



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describes precisely a growth of the light liaison between the triumvir and the queen into a fierce though fitful passion which has moments of self-forgetting devotion (when no serious sacrifice is involved); and second, that even in this second phase the coquette, even the hard and brutal woman, flashes out at moments too; in her consummate dying speech, lover and actress, the jealous woman and the magnificent queen, the mistress of a Roman, who wished to die like him "after the high Roman fashion", and the Oriental weakling who experimented first in "easy ways to die"—all are intermingled. The test of Cleopatra's coherence is not that a rather wooden mind may not discover inconsistency in the play of her "infinite variety", but that she impresses our imagination, not in spite of her variety but by and through it, as a personality superbly real and one. Schücking has thrown much light on the traces of "primitive" technique in Shakespeare's art; but he has not reckoned sufficiently with the fact that Shakespeare's way was not to discard the crude features of dramaturgical art that he found, but to turn them into "something rich and strange". And this is not merely a trait of the artist but a trait of the mind and of the man.

Influence of  
Stage-study.  
Interpretation  
of the  
Soliloquy

§ 3. But the general disposition to explain character in terms of its meaner or less ideal constituents, or again, to apply rigid standards of coherence to its rich flexibility and organic capacity for growth, was complicated with another influence, already noticed, which on the whole told powerfully in the same direction. This was the more intimate study of the Elizabethan stage and stage conditions, of the mentality of the audience, their current interests and preoccupations, and the relation between the audience, the theatrical company, and the playmaker. A more historical temper, as well as an altered psychology, was telling upon Shakesperean criticism. We have seen how this study of audience and stage reacted upon the conception of the function, and finally of the character, of Shakespeare himself.\* But it also told upon the interpretation of the characters he created. For as soon as the audience and its tastes, expectations, and prejudices, was brought into the forefront of the determining factors of a play, many features in the text assumed a new complexion. These considerations dominate the work of Professors Stoll and Schücking. Thus, the soliloquy, they contend, must be taken primarily as a means of giving information to the audience. Hence it must be interpreted at its face value, since otherwise the audience would be misinformed and its purpose frustrated. On the pre-Shakesperean stage, soliloquies



were habitually used to give a program of the speaker's intentions. The whole business was commonly managed with the utmost naïveté. Its use in the great tragedies is commonly regarded as a supreme example of Shakespeare's transformation of these naïve devices into instruments of dramatic portraiture. But Schücking contends that he often uses it undramatically just to tell the audience what they are to think of a character. His villains frankly explain that they are such, and that their victims are noble. Thus Oliver pays his tribute to Orlando, Macbeth to Duncan, Iago to Cassio. And Schücking lays down the canon that, in general, assertions of one character about another are to be treated as giving correct information about them, even or especially when it is "undramatic" or "unrealistic" for the speaker to give it. Much of this is acute and valuable; but we miss the recognition that this primitive frankness of villains survived into Shakespeare's mature art, not because he had no other way of letting the audience know what they had to think, but because it wonderfully expressed the cynicism of Iago or the stricken conscience of Macbeth. And some cases where apparently wrong "information" is given reduce him to the dilemma of qualifying either his canon or his interpretation of the character, or else (as in Lady Macbeth's ascription to her husband of too much of the "milk of human kindness" in i. 5) of supposing Shakespeare to have "momentarily failed to grasp his own creation".

§ 4. That Shakespeare constantly did so, that his "grasp" was of the loosest, and allowed his persons to say what the situation suggested, whether in keeping with their "character" or no, is in fact the most habitual "realist" explanation of these "inconsistencies". Applied to creations like Cleopatra, it fails or is at the most indecisive. But criticism of this type has sometimes done salutary service in explaining "contradictions" which the "idealist" had spent brilliant ingenuity in seeking to explain away. An interesting case is Hamlet's reference in the third Soliloquy to

"Inconsistencies"  
of Character

the 'bourn' from which no traveller returns.

Yet he had just seen the ghost. Had he forgotten? If so, where was that overplus of intellectual energy, the ground of his tragic failure? Gervinus disposed of the difficulty easily enough: the "ghost" was merely a hallucination. But no school of criticism to-day accepts this naïve imputation of modern rationalist belief to the Elizabethan playgoer. Not much more plausible is Kuno



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Fischer's explanation. Hamlet, he peremptorily declares, is entirely right; no one returns in the body from the other world; but the ghost is a bodiless spirit. And this "spirit" has given him some rather detailed information about the country which he now calls "undiscovered".

From such laboured trifling, modern criticism, whether of the psychological or of the realist school, turns impatiently away, and with justice. We recognize with a clearness which marks a definite and substantial advance, that it is not only not imperative, as it might be in Racine, but wrong, to demand complete consistency in the Shakesperean drama. The psychological analyst of Hamlet's mental history has no difficulty in explaining it here. The man who had surmised in the previous scene (ii. 2) that—

"the spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil; and the devil . . . perhaps,  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy  
Abuses me to damn me,"—

was not far removed from the mood in which he now quotes a familiar aphorism about death which Seneca had made a commonplace of educated Elizabethan talk.<sup>1</sup> But for the realist critic the case is simpler still. Shakespeare was writing a play, not an exposition of Hamlet's personality; its successive scenes were steps in the plot, no doubt, but what the audience wanted first of all was a succession of telling situations, and this Shakespeare gave them, without curious questioning whether the effective detail of one scene squared strictly with the effective detail of another. The Ghost thrilled the whole house with piquant horror; the Senecan commonplace flattered its more cultivated section with the zest of a literary allusion; but no one thought of inquiring whether the two kinds of satisfaction thus experienced could logically be enjoyed together. This way of regarding such discrepancies was endorsed, nearly a century ago, by no less a critic than Goethe, when, as Schücking points out, he remarked to Eckermann (*Conversations with Goethe*, 18th April, 1827), that Shakespeare "makes his persons say on every occasion just what is proper, effective, and good in precisely that situation, without much anxious care or calculation whether these words might possibly contradict some other passage". Such contradictions are to be found; but Goethe's words imply, what none knew better, that far from disturbing the unity of dramatic impression, they may be taken up into it and enrich it.

<sup>1</sup> "Unde non unquam remeavit ullus."



There is another kind of seeming incoherence, to which Stoll and others have called attention, which does not arise from compliance with the tastes of the audience at all, but from the poet's naïve over-indulgence of his own. A mechanically rigid criticism will find countless passages out of apparent keeping with the character of the speakers; a more imaginative and supple criticism will interpret most of them as expressive of changing moods in a rich or shifting personality. But some remain in which even idealists like Bradley admit that Shakespeare's poetry or his wit has simply rushed in, overpowering the control of his dramatic sense.

§ 5. But more fundamental questions than that of "inconsistency" are raised by Professor Stoll. We read Shakespeare's tragedies, and especially we read *Hamlet*, deeply imbued with ideals of tragedy derived not from the Elizabethans but from Aristotle. We assume that the "hero" of tragedy will conform to the subtle Aristotelian (but thoroughly un-English) demand that he shall be gravely at fault. We rule out, as he did, the "perfect" hero. Did the Elizabethan audience entertain these ideas about tragedy? Would it have understood Bradley's analysis, developed from Aristotle and Hegel, of the tragedy of Shakespeare? And if it would not, are we entitled to assume that Shakespeare gave it what it would not understand? The doctrine of playwright and audience here parts company abruptly with the doctrine of the autocratic creator. We know that the classic type of drama found ready acceptance only in courtly and academic circles, however keenly certain effective Senecan motives and situations, such as the Ghost and the call to revenge, may have been welcomed on the popular stage. To this audience, thinks Professor Stoll, the most congenial kind of hero was one after the pattern of the heroes of the romances of chivalry which were still eagerly read; a champion whose adventures they could follow and exult in. Tamburlaine and Henry V were such heroes, and we see how this romantic bias, aided by national and Protestant pride, made a hero of King John.

That *Hamlet* was meant to be, and understood as, such a hero, is then a plausible contention. For two centuries after his creation there is no trace of the *Hamlet*, so familiar to us, who fails by fatal irresolution, the "tragic flaw" in his own soul. "The psychological morbid *Hamlet* is exclusively the discovery of the Romantic age. . . . The present *Hamlet*-theory arose and was developed far away from every tradition and echo of the stage, by professors in a country where the theatre was anathema, and by Goethe who saw in him a sentimental variation of his own Werther, and

Influence of  
Popular  
Tradition:  
Stoll,  
Robertson



who was completely ignorant of the conditions of the Elizabethan drama."

And precisely these conditions, it is contended, urge a different interpretation of *Hamlet*. For here even more than elsewhere popular taste and theatrical precedent exercised a powerful control. Shakespeare was not using an obscure and insignificant story, as presently he did in *Othello*; he was refashioning an *old* play of extraordinary fame and popularity. The traditional outlines and incidents he was bound to keep, and he could not without peril alter the fundamental complexion of Hamlet's character. It will thus become probable that the import of Shakespeare's Hamlet must be sought in characteristics which he shares with his predecessor; that he is concerned in a deadly duel with his uncle, a personality not introduced to serve as a vulgar foil to the noble idealist, but as a mighty opposite, very nearly his match; that Hamlet's delay, without which the play would collapse, is not the result of weakness and irresoluteness, but, as in the old Hamlet, of hedging and finesse; and that the parts of the action in which he shows these qualities most decisively, as in his sharp practice on the voyage to England, are not rude episodic survivals, but of the very stuff of the Shakesperean Hamlet. On these lines a scene, like that in his father's closet after the play, the meaning of which is still in debate, becomes perfectly clear. Hamlet decides to spare the King, not because he is irresolute and snatches at a plausible pretext for inaction, but for the very reason that he gives. "There is a defect in the drama, of course, but it is only as our technique is imposed on the drama that this is turned into a tragic defect in the hero."

We cannot here enter into Mr. Stoll's explanation of the soliloquies, on which the modern psychological interpretation of *Hamlet* has always principally been based. The case of *Othello* and *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, where we possess Shakespeare's immediate source, and can measure with some accuracy the enormous transformation which his creative energy effected, lends little support to the view that what he did in *Hamlet* was mainly to clothe in his incomparable language the situations, motives, and characters of Thomas Kyd.

A view, analogous at certain points, has been put forward with his usual incisiveness by Mr. J. M. Robertson in *The Problem of Hamlet*. That that problem remains unsolved is the fault solely, he contends, of the philosophizing bent of our criticism. We fail to find a formula for his "soul" because he is an imperfect amalgam of two souls. The Hamlet of tradition and the Hamlet of Shakespeare's



own design, overlap and partly efface each other. But Mr. Robertson, unlike Mr. Stoll, holds the irresolute Hamlet to be the Hamlet of Shakespeare, and the resolute, "heroic" Hamlet to be that of his predecessor, imperfectly effaced. That Shakespeare, at the height of his art, did not efface him completely must be laid to the charge of the extraordinarily popular old play which he could not wholly adopt and was not at liberty entirely to throw over. He wished to make the Prince a refined and subtle Elizabethan. But he had to keep the action in all essentials. The revenge of the original "barbaric" Hamlet was delayed because the King was simply too well guarded to be got at. "The revenge of the refined Hamlet must be delayed as was that of the barbaric Hamlet, without the original reason—that is, the inability to get at the King. To motive this hesitation, Shakespeare injects into the Prince 'implicit pessimism', but it is insufficient", for he leaves matter standing "which conflicts with the solution of pessimism". It is certainly probable that incomplete assimilation of old matter to new, or new to old, cannot be dispensed with in the final interpretation of *Hamlet*.

§ 6. The "historical" method of interpretation, which finds the key to Shakespeare's characterization in the tastes, interests, and preoccupations of his audience, has been pursued to further developments more recently, with much labour and scholarship, by Miss L. Winstanley. In her *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession* (1921) she attempted to show that Shakespeare wrote for an audience absorbed in the question then (1601-2) in suspense—whether James, son of Mary of Scotland, would succeed Elizabeth—and that he deliberately designed the play as an "allegory", its real subject being the murder of Mary's first husband (Darnley) by her second (Bothwell) a generation before. Hamlet thus stood for James, her son by Darnley—except where, for the better congruence of the allegory, he had to symbolize a contemporary favourite, the Earl of Essex. Miss Winstanley quotes at length the correspondence in which Elizabeth cavalierly enough took the Prince to task for delaying to avenge his father's murder; and it may be allowed that the comparison of James VI with Hamlet would be by no means so grotesque in 1602 to Englishmen not yet familiar with him, as it is to a posterity for whom the first Stuart King has been remorselessly drawn by Gardiner and Scott. But the parallel, often suggested before, remains too remote to justify the view that it was intended. Shakespeare and the audience were doubtless acquainted with the Darnley tragedy, then almost a generation old; it was part of the common stock of story which floated in the fringes of

Winstanley



his mind as of theirs. But from that common consciousness of an old story to the proposition that Shakespeare deliberately used it to drive home a modern political application is a long step, which neither Miss Winstanley's reasoning nor her facts by any means enables us to take. The Elizabethan playgoer went to hear a play, not a political pamphlet, and the author of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and *King Lear* (the subjects of a more recent essay by the same writer on the same lines) wrote out of an experience of thought and passion not to be explained by the hopes and fears of politics. If, moreover, political allegory was what Shakespeare offered, he missed his mark, when at the very height of his powers and artistry, more egregiously than any novice, for not a shred of evidence remains that anyone who saw or read the play guessed what he meant.

(iii) THE SONNETS

Lee,  
Alden,  
Acheson

§ 1. One of the most substantial additions made to Shakesperean study during our period is the fresh light thrown upon the Sonnets by the comparative study of the European sonnet of the sixteenth century. The exploration of this field is due to the initiative, and in great part to the researches, of Sir Sidney Lee. It bore, in two important ways, upon the interpretation of Shakespeare. First, it showed the dependence, to a quite unsuspected degree, of the English sonnet upon French, and thence, but as a rule not directly, upon Italian, models. Petrarch was ultimately the master of the whole vast company of sonneteers; his motives, situations, allusions, and phrasing can be discerned in all ramifications of the school in Italy, France, and England alike. And further, this derivative character of a vast majority of the sonnets does much, if not quite so much as Lee thinks, to invalidate whatever claim they make (and many made no such claim) to be outpourings of sincere emotion, to be taken at their face value. Lee showed convincingly how many of the reputable sonneteers of England were only following a colleague in France when they bewailed their mistress's absence, or tossed on a sleepless couch, or called on the cold moon for sympathy, or denounced the cruelty of "a dark lady", or were wrung by the rival claims of love and friendship, or protested that in all this they were original and spontaneous—"no pickpurse of another's wit", as Drayton sang, in a line borrowed from Sidney, who had himself borrowed it (Lee, *Life*, p. 171 n.).

Shakespeare's Sonnets, though easily surpassing all the rest in lyric splendour, certainly show no disposition to refrain from the



use of this rich mass of "conventional" material. But Lee assumes too readily that the use of a convention is incompatible with fresh and spontaneous feeling. All art employs convention. The fourteen lines and exact rhyme-scheme of the sonnet are conventions, accepted from his predecessors by the most impassioned poet who uses the sonnet at all. What is certain, as has been especially emphasized by Prof. Alden in his edition (1908), is that Shakespeare's Sonnets stand out in many important respects, both of content and treatment, from all the other sonnet-sequences of the time. Lee does not dwell upon this matter, but he thinks it likely that three groups of Shakespeare's Sonnets possess "autobiographic" quality, some external evidence of the facts being in these cases available. (i) The preliminary group (1-17) addressed to a patron, entreating him to marry, and also (ii) those, forming the bulk of the collection, where a man is addressed in terms of ardent friendship, both had as their object the young Earl of Southampton, to whom, nearly at the same time (1594) Shakespeare dedicated, in not dissimilar language, *The Rape of Lucrece*. (iii) The intrigue sonnets (especially 40-2, 132-3, 144) indicate betrayal of the poet by his mistress and his friend. This conflict of "love" and "friendship" was a hackneyed theme, but a contemporary poem of precisely this date, *Willobie His Avis* (1594) introduces a certain "W. S.", an "old player", to whom "Willobie" recounts his unsuccessful wooing of "Avisa", as one "who not long before had tried the courtesy of the like passion, and was now newly recovered of the like infection". The fair chance that "W. S." thus described is Shakespeare weighs sufficiently with Lee, and may rightly weigh with us, to justify belief that the intrigue, however "conventional", was not wholly unreal. His final conclusion, however, is a somewhat surprising compound of triumphant scepticism and unreasonable credulity. "The sole biographical inference which is deducible with full confidence from the 'Sonnets' is that, at one time in his career, Shakespeare, like the majority of his craft, disdained few weapons of flattery in an endeavour to monopolize the bountiful patronage of a young man of rank." Here is realism in the ascendant indeed, and the whole theory of convention and literary artifice cast to the winds! The glorious utterances about love and the "marriage of true minds", about the preciousness of friends, about the immortality of poetry, are sonnet-eering commonplaces touched to new beauty by an uncommonly clever pen; but the passages of abject flattery came straight from his heart!



## RECENT SHAKESPEREAN INVESTIGATION

The primrose path of autobiographical interpretation, upon which Lee set a somewhat reluctant foot, has never, during the past century, lacked eager votaries. It has undoubtedly, during the past thirty years, been the line of approach to the Sonnets most pertinaciously and ingeniously pursued. An argument for its *prima facie* justification has been drawn, as we saw in a previous section (III, i, § 6), and by a critic little inclined to emphasize their biographical aspect, from the obvious imperfections of this sonnet-sequence if taken as made-up story. But little of definite value has yet emerged from these speculations, and it will suffice for the purpose of the present outline to mention the recent elaborate attempt of a representative twentieth-century scholar, also already noticed in a previous section, Mr. A. Acheson, in his book on *Shakespeare's Sonnet Story* (1922), to reconstruct in fresh and ample detail, but unfortunately, also, with plentiful resort to conjectural surmise, the personal background of these enigmatic but inexhaustibly fascinating, and at their highest reach unsurpassably beautiful, poems.



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